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4 Privet Drive, Surrey

Harry Potter woke with a gasp, slapping a hand to his sweaty forehead. Absent-mindedly rubbing his scar he collapsed back onto the thin mattress and sighed. Another night, another dream filled with cruel red eyes and flashes of green light. Glancing at the clock, he saw that it was 5:30 in the morning. Heaving yet another sigh he abruptly stood up and began to pace the small room. He tried to tear his mind away from the dream, and though he couldn't remember any specific details, he could still feel the terror and despair weighing heavily on his heart. It was the same despair he felt every time he remembered that Sirius was dead. It had been over two weeks since the incident at the ministry and it was only now that Harry really began to realise that Sirius wasn't coming back. Harry was alone. But then, he supposed he had always been alone, and even in the brief years he had known Sirius, that hadn't really changed. Sure, Sirius had given him hope that he wouldn't always be alone, but what good was any of that when Harry hardly ever got to talk to - and even less often see- his godfather? Hell, he'd had more conversations with Draco Malfoy than he'd ever had with Sirius, even if they weren't so pleasant. He could always count on hatred and indifference to be a constant in his life, but love? Family? Maybe it was time he accepted that he had no one. Harry's dark thoughts continued until 7:00, when Harry heard his relatives stirring. Pulling on a too-big T-shirt he opened his door and went downstairs to the kitchen to begin breakfast.

He was cracking eggs into the pan when Dudley barrelled his way into the kitchen, followed by Uncle Vernon. Never one to bother with pleasantries where Harry was concerned, Vernon snapped, "Hurry up boy, and get the food done. Don't make us wait!"

"Yes, Uncle Vernon." Harry replied dully, adding bacon to the pan. The smell of fat made his stomach feel queasy, and he had a feeling he would be passing on breakfast again. It had become something of a routine for Harry to skip breakfast, but it wasn't always him that made the decision. More often than not Aunt Petunia would enter the kitchen and declare that he would get nothing to eat until he

completed chores, then hand him a list he couldn't possibly get done till late afternoon. Lately too, the list had included chores that he had already completed. Really, how many times did the lawn need to be mowed in a week? By the time he had finished cooking and served his relatives, a light film of grease had adhered itself to his skin, making him feel sticky and uncomfortable. He left the kitchen and made his way out into the garden. His first chore for the day was to tidy up the garden shed, and he glanced over at the rickety tin shed dubiously. That was bound to take a while. No way was he going to be finished anytime soon. He shoved the frustration he felt aside and walked to the shed.

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Days passed in the same monotonous routine and Harry sunk into a depression, passing the time in a haze. One afternoon he found himself sitting on the window sill of his room wising he had Hedwig for company. She however, was banned from the house, as were any other owls. He had sent her with a letter to the Weasleys, telling them not to owl him (for fear of Death By Vernon) and that he would see them come September 1st. Harry had been particularly snarky that day, and frightened -

Dudley with a few made up words. That of course, had led to a whole lot of trouble. Vernon had taken his trunk from the cupboard under the stairs and dragged it to the yard. Harry had barely managed to rescue a shard from Sirius' mirror before Uncle Vernon had set the contents of his trunk alight. "Didn't I tell you not to use that unnaturalness in this house! You're never going back to that freak school of yours, not if I have anything to say about it. Harry had watched sadly as his belongings were burned before he trudged up to his room and stashed the shard with his invisibility cloak and the Marauder's Map under the loose floorboard. He was more than a little worried, however, about the fact that he no longer had a wand. Then again, the wand had been useless against Voldemort, and since Harry was destined to kill the man, he would have needed a new wand anyway. Still, he had become quite fond of the holly and phoenix feather wand, it was like a part of him. Shrugging, he had returned downstairs to complete his chores.

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Lunchtime came and went and Harry had only just finished pruning the shrubs that lined the edge of the yard. Hefting the cutters over his shoulder he walked to the shed to put them away. As he approached the shed he was startled by a voice. "Sssooo many sssmaaalll juicccy moussiesss. Sssooo delectable..." Smiling slightly, Harry leaned the cutters against the shed and stepped around the corner, moving into the dark space between the wall and the fence. "Hello?" he called out hesitantly, and was pleased when the snake answered, "You ssspeak my tongue, human?"

"Yesss, where are you sssnake?" Harry hissed, eyeing the ground as he carefully shuffled through the leaves.

Suddenly a crimson head poked up through the leaves and the snake replied "I'm here, human."

Harry sat a small distance from the snake and it slithered slowly over to him. It was only a small snake, a baby, but it was beautifully coloured. A crimson head sporting splashes of gold, faded to a deep green flecked with silver. "Do you have a name, snake?" asked Harry.

"A name?"

"Sssomething you are called by otherssss. My name isss Harry."

"Harry, I have no name. I am jussst me." The snake curled around Harry's wrist and looked at him. "You are niccce Harry. You don't run like all the deliciouss little mousiesss and the other humanssss."

Harry smiled. "I like snakessss. Hey! Want to hang around with me for a while. You know my nest matesss don't really talk to me and I get pretty bored without company." 'Nest mates? Strange how parseltongue translates', thought Harry.

"That soundsss pleasssant. Will you carry me with you?"

"Most cccertainly," replied Harry, inclining his head to the little snake.

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"I wasss just hunting. Will you wait while I feassst? Scrumptiousss mousiesss here, with little bonesiesss that smash and-"

"That's fine" said Harry, smiling grimly. He repositioned himself against the shed wall and watched the snake with interest as it sat in wait for a meal. After a while, a small garden mouse darted around the corner and Harry tensed in anticipation. Then, so fast that he hardly saw it, the snake struck, sinking it's fangs into the little mouse, which twitched for a few seconds then lay still. Harry chose to ignore the snake as it swallowed its prey, and his wandering eyes fell upon something tucked inside an old, cracked flower pot. 'Cigarettes? Must be Dudley's,' Harry thought, and grinned wickedly. He could just imagine Aunt Petunia's reaction if she found out her precious Diddikins was a smoker, and not just tobacco either. As well as a considerably stash of store bought cigarettes, there were a few hand rolled ones that Harry was sure were pot. He began to tuck them back, but stopped and removed one from the open packet. Dudders wouldn't miss one. He dug around at the bottom of the flower pot and came up with a lighter, and proceeded to light the cigarette. Ten minutes later he felt a bit more relaxed and the smoke had taken the edge off of his hunger. Looking down he found the small snake curled up near his feet and hissed "I mussst go inside now. Will you come?"

"I hasss never been inssside before. Should be interesssting." It was getting dark as Harry walked back to the house, the snake curled around his waist and beneath the over-large shirt, and he vaguely wondered what the date was if the days were getting shorter already. He had completely lost track of time, going through the days in sullen stupor. He was fairly certain it was past his birthday, though he hadn't received any gifts from anyone due to Uncle Vernon's desire to keep as little freakishness out of the house as possible. He entered the house to find the Dursleys already eating, and was surprised to see another plate (though not as heavily piled as even Aunt Petunia's) at the table. He hesitated before his Aunt snapped; "Well, what are you waiting for? Sit and eat." It was only once he had settled that he looked up to see his cousin smirking and a pleased look on his uncle's face. "What's the occasion?" asked Harry.

Uncle Vernon spoke, his chin wobbling, "Your aunt, cousin and I are going away for a time. Marge has generously invited us to accompany her to a dog show, very prestigious. We'll be gone three days, and while we are you are to remain in your cupboard." He paused as Harry slumped in his chair. "We leave tomorrow, and whilst we are gone, I expect you to behave." He continued in an imperious tone. "Mark my words boy, if we come back to find the house ruined, there'll be hell to pay."

"As if I could get up to much locked in a bloody cupboard" Harry snarled, his voice raised. Perhaps not the best way to talk to his uncle. "I'll have none of that from you boy! You've got five minutes and then you'll be in your room. By room of course, he meant cupboard."

Harry stopped to put the snake in the cupboard before he rushed to the bathroom, used the toilet and rinsed his face before trudging along the landing and down the stairs. Waiting at the bottom was his uncle and cousin, and Harry quietly muttered "Bastards." as he walked past them. Not quiet enough, unfortunately. His uncle grabbed him by the scruff of the neck as he crouched to enter the cupboard. "What did you say to me boy?" he yelled, his face livid. Harry cried out as his head struck the wall, and a fist collided with his stomach. "After everything we've done for you, you ungrateful freak!" he fumed. "Don't speak to my father like that again, Potter!" said Dudley, a smirk fixed on his piggy face. Harry gasped again as a fist, Dudley's this time, caught him in the jaw.

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It was only minutes later that Harry was roughly thrown into the cupboard, but it felt much longer. He was used to being harassed by Dudley's gang, but this was different. Vernon had pushed Harry around before, given him the odd slap, but he had never hit him before. Winded and pained, Harry collapsed unconscious on the hard floor.

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Harry woke to a deafening silence. Light shone through cracks around the door, and he knew it must be the next day. He began to

sit up, but hissed in a sharp breath and froze as a sharp pain shot through his ribs and arm. It felt like he'd broken at least a few bones. He lay still, breathing shallowly, and nearly yelled out when a voice enquired, "Missster Harry isss awake now? "

"Ahh! You ssscared me, snake!"

"Sssorry Harry. I will not ssspeak."

"No, no, i'm glad you're here snake. You surprisssed me, that'sss all." Harry took a cigarette from his pocket and began to chew. Harry and the snake passed the day chatting, and Harry fell asleep long after darkness had fallen, weak and hungry, the snake curled on his chest.

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Harry was desperately thirsty. "If only I had my wand, snake. I could get usss out of here."

"What isss a wand, Harry?"

"Itssss a piece of wood, with a specccial core in the middle. It letss me do magicsss. My uncle dessstroyed it though."

"Why do you need thisss wand, human? You can ssspeak my language without a wand, issss thissss not magic?"

"I suppossse. Itsss different though."

"Different how? Try Harry try. Letsss go out into the garden. Yesss, the garden. Warm sssun to bassssk in, yummy mousiessss to eatsiesss."

Harry grinned. "There are few who can do wandlesssss magic, friend. It isss a skill."

"Have you ever tried, Harry?"

"No, i'm not powerful enough. It wouldn't work."

"Sssss... I do not want to ssstay in this darknesssss Harry."

Harry sighed and focussed on the door. "Alohamora is a sssimple charm, I supposse."

He reached his hand out and grasped the low handle. "Alohamora!" Nothing. Hmph. He tried again. "Alohamora!" Again he tried the handle, but it was still locked. "No ussse, snake. I can't do it."

"You ssspe in the language of humansss, Harry. Why not ssspeak asss you ssspeak to me?"

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Harry frowned thoughtfully. "I never thought to ... I supposse I could try."

Once again, he reached out his good arm and grasped the handle. This time when he spoke, he focussed on the warm snake that was curled beneath his shirt. "Alohamoraaaaa." His voiced hissed out, and while he thought 'alohamora', what came out was entirely different. He felt a thrill of excitement when he heard a quiet click, but he suddenly felt extremely tired. "Yesss, snake, you were right. I'm sssuddenly so tired, though. Jusst a short ressst. Then we can go out to the garden." With that, Harry fell into a deep sleep.

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Harry's mind fluttered at the edge of waking, awareness fading in and out. Distantly he thought he hear footsteps. He frowned. The Dursleys couldn't be back yet, surely. It had only been two days. 'Then again,' thought Harry, 'maybe I was unconscious longer than I thought.' Gathering his broken arm against his chest he strained to listen. Burglars perhaps? Or a worse kind of intruder? A Death Eater? Harry froze at that thought. Above his head, a stair creaked and Harry held his breath. 'Dont be such a wimp. The house creaks all the time. There's no one there.'

"Sssnake?" There was no answer.

Suddenly Harry remembered he wasn't trapped anymore. Grinning broadly and completely forgetting his moment of fear he gritted his teeth and stood on his knees. Pushing the door open with his good arm, he squinted in the bright light. "Excellent!" he hissed. He crawled to his feet and walked to the back door. 'Ah, sunlight!' Feels sooo good' thought Harry as he stepped out of the house. 'I wonder where that snake is?' He was saddened by the thought that the snake was gone. The little thing had been good to talk to. Sighing, he lowered himself to the ground and laid back, closing his eyes and letting the sun warm him. He was starting to drift off when a shadow moved over him. 'Damn clouds!' He froze however when he heard a rustle of fabric. He opened his eyes, and found himself looking into the angry black eyes of one Severus Snape. "Bloody hell!"

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"Language, Potter!" spat Snape, glaring down at him.

"Professor! What are you doing here? " 'God, I hope he's here on Dumbledore's orders.'

"The question is what the hell are you doing here Potter? Why are you not at school?"

"Huh? School? What- what date is it?"

Snape was clearly furious. "What date is it Potter? What date? It is currently the 2nd of September, and you are now a day late for school. Do you have any- any idea the worry you have caused? The entire school has been searching for you, and now I have been sent – wasting my valuable time- to find you, and you are laying sunbaking, and you ask me what date is it? His voice, which had started out as a yell, had now quietened to a harsh whisper.

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"I- uh... lost track. I didn't realise so much time had passed." He frowned. How had so much time gone past without him realising? He'd been a bit of a mess, but he didn't think he'd been that out of it.



“You expect me to believe you simply lost track! Do you not own a calendar, Potter? Or perhaps you entertain the belief that you need not catch the train along with the common folk? You were just waiting for an escort?”

Harry remained silent.

“Well? Get up. I do not have any more time to waste on you.” With that, Snape turned and strode back into the house. Gingerly, Harry rose to his feet and followed, holding his arm to his chest.

In the kitchen, Snape turned to him with a sneer and ordered: ‘Go get your belongings Potter, and be quick about it. I have no desire to spend excess time in this place.’

‘Well, who would have thought we’d ever agree on something?’ thought Harry. Turning on the spot, Harry exited the kitchen and went up the stairs. He smirked. Everything he owned now would fit in his pockets. Coming back down the stairs, he made a split second decision. Walking as quickly as he could, he slipped behind the shed and filled his pockets with what was left of Dudley’s smokes. Not a bad haul, actually. He had just stood up when he heard a quiet voice speak his name. “Hello Harry, it isss wonderful in the garden isn’t it. Sssooo much better than the indoorssss.”

“Yessss, snake. Lisssten to me, I have to go now, back to school.”

“Sssschool? What issss school?”

“Aaah, a wonderful placce, where I learn about magicsss. Would you like to come with me? I would look after you and itsss very nice there.” Harry hoped the snake would agree, he felt they had become quite close, and he could talk to the snake about anything.

“Such an adventure it will be!”hissed the snake. “I would sssimply love to go to thisss... school.”

“It’s decided then! Come snake, but stay out of sight for now. I don’t think snakesss are allowed in Hogwartsss.”

“Ssssuch a ssslippery ssserpent, Harry. I think we are going to be great friendsss...”

Harry smiled as the snake crawled beneath into a pocket of his pants. Suddenly remembering Snape, he hurried back into the kitchen, only to find it empty. “Sir? Sir, I’m ready to go,” he called. He walked into the next room and stopped dead. Snape stood staring into the cupboard under the stairs, but looked up when Harry walked in. “What is this, Potter?” he hissed in a deadly voice.

Harry fidgeted and looked away from the cupboard. “Er- what’s what, sir?”

“Do not feign ignorance, Potter.”

“It’s just a cupboard sir. We should really go. I don’t want to waste any more of your time, Professor.”

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Glaring, Snape crooked a finger and beckoned Harry. Feeling quite reluctant, Harry shuffled over to Snape and glanced into the cupboard. He was taken by surprise to see a rather large amount of blood staining the ragged blanket that lay on the cold floor. He looked down and realised the same blood stained his own shirt, though he supposed most of it must be on the back, because it was hardly noticeable. “Erm...”

Suddenly, Snape raised his arm and Harry couldn’t help but flinch at the movement. An odd look passed over Snape’s face as he looked between Harry and the cupboard. “Where are your family, Potter?”

“Oh, well they went away for a few days. They should be back tomorrow I think, or maybe today. I’m not quite sure.”

Snape suddenly place a finger beneath Harry’s chin and lifted his head up, searching his eyes. Harry was so surprised by the contact that he was stunned into silence, but when Snape’s eyes widened, he jerked his head back and looked away. ‘Bloody Snape. None of his business. Should have learned Occlumency when I had the chance.’

Snape spoke. "You're relatives beat you and locked you in a cupboard, Potter," he sneered, but there was no malice in his eyes. Instead, they looked confused, troubled. For some reason this angered Harry. 'I must look so weak,' thought Harry. 'It's none of his bloody business anyway.'

Annoyed, Harry replied, "Like you always say sir, only the best for a spoiled, pampered little child." Turning he began to walk towards the front hall, but his shoulder was grabbed from behind and he gasped. Snape immediately released him. "Do they beat you often Potter?"

"It's really none of your business Snape, and if it's all the same to you, I'd much rather not talk about it."

"Well it's not all the same to me, Potter, and I will thank you not to be rude. Go to the kitchen and sit."

Harry scowled, but did as he was told.

"Take off your shirt," ordered Snape, who was searching his pockets and placing vials on the table. He handed Harry one. "Drink."

Not in the mood to argue, Harry followed both orders, and ignored Shape's open stares. He glanced down however, and found his torso was covered in large, dark bruises. Snape tutted and took the chair beside Harry, before beginning to poke and prod Harry's upper body. Feeling distinctly uncomfortable, Harry was about to protest when a particularly painful jab made him gasp.

"Hm. A broken rib, it would appear, and that arm doesn't look good either," mused Snape. Then slapping the table, he stood and said, "Well, that pain relieving potion will kick in soon, but you'll have to wait until Hogwarts to mend the broken bones. Up, Potter and go fetch another shirt. That one is entirely unsuitable."

'So much for sympathy,' thought Harry. He grumbled his way up the stairs and plucked a Dudley cast-off from the wardrobe. Then, remembering he had no other clothes he quickly stuffed a -

shopping back with a few things. He was not looking forward to wearing these things around the school. Hopefully he would be able to go to Hogsmeade with someone.

He re-entered the kitchen and Snape looked at him. "When I said fetch another shirt Potter, I meant one that was halfway decent. That looks absolutely ridiculous."

"Well, you're going to have to put up with it because this is all I've got," he retorted.

"I see," Snape replied shortly. Very well, where is your trunk?"

"Er... well, the thing is sir--"

"Spit it out, Potter!"

"My uncle burned all my things."

"Your uncle burned all your things, " Snape repeated slowly.

"Yeah." Harry shrugged. "They were always threatening it but this time they actually did it."

"Fine." Snape snapped. "Let's go then. Keep a hold of your wand."

"Burned."

Snape froze. "Your wand is... gone. The phoenix feather wand?"

"The very same," said Harry drily.

Snape then spouted some very choice words that Harry was fairly sure teachers weren't supposed to say in the presence of students. "It doesn't matter sir, I'll just get another one. No big deal."

"No big deal?!" Snape sputtered. "Potter, you have no idea! My God, someone is going to pay for this!" With that he stormed out the front door and into the front yard. Harry hurried to keep up and caught Snape at the fence. "Sir, how are we getting back to Hogwarts?"

"We are apparating."

"Ugh. Sir, I don't think my ribs could tolerate that at the moment."

Snape spared him an exasperated glance and sighed. "I suppose not. Very well." Instead of grabbing Harry's elbow, he walked to the curb and stuck out his wand. Not two seconds later, a gaudy purple bus screeched to a halt in front of them.

A gangly, pimple-face young man appeared in the door and announced; "Welcome to the Knight Bus, salvation of stranded witches and wizards everywhere!"

"Get on!" snapped Snape, and Harry grinned.

So, it might be a while before I update this, just a bit less than a month cos i have exams coming up. But after that, i'll be on holidays and updating as much as possible

ROBERT19588, fivespice: The story starts after book 5 so in the first chapter, Harry turned 16. He is now in his 6th year at Hogwarts. I'm not really sure what kinds of snakes England has so if anyone has any ideas for what kind of snake it is let me know... Harry hasn't forgotten about Hedwig either, she'll be around later. Lastly, Harry won't be using a time-turner to get his things back. He still has his most important belongings (the cloak and the map) except for his wand.

Angel74: thanks! Here it is, updating a bit sooner than expected, cos ive been really slack with the studying... im really lazy when it comes to uni stuff.

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### An outing with Snape

The trip back to school was not pleasant for several reasons. For one, Snape was clearly in a foul mood and refused to talk, and secondly because Ernie was an extremely erratic driver. Harry's body was constantly jarred and he thought that if it weren't for the pain relieving potion Snape had given him earlier, he would have screamed every time he moved. Eventually however, Stan announced their arrival at Hogsmeade and Snape and Harry both got off the bus. They walked in silence back to the school and arrived, to Harry's great disappointment, just as the bell rang for lunch. He most certainly didn't want to be seen with his face black and blue, nor wearing clothes that were ripped and about six sizes too big. "Sir-"he began, but was cut off.

"No, Potter. I am not going to indulge your wishes. Now, follow." Snape turned and walked away and Harry spat "You're really enjoying this, aren't you Snape?"

Snape smirked and Harry's insides leapt with anger. "Indeed I am, Mr. Potter."

Scowling, Harry followed Snape into the Entrance Hall just as a small crowd of students descended the staircase headed for the Great Hall. Harry focussed on Snape's heels and tried not to listen to the gasps

as people saw him. He could only imagine how he looked. When someone he knew called out to him, he pretended he didn't hear them. He could not however, ignore it when he heard a vindictive comment from Draco Malfoy. Harry's head whipped up and his eyes flashed. He heard some gasps as people saw his face fully but he ignored them and hissed at Malfoy; "Shut your mouth before I shut it for you, Malfoy!"

"Ooh, tough words, Potter. But if you ask me, from the look of you, I'd say that's an empty threat. You obviously can't look after yourself at all." Malfoy's smirk was wiped from his face as Harry roared and charged at him. He knocked Malfoy to the ground and proceeded to punch the smug face beneath him, ignoring Snape's angry yells to stop. Harry, however, was weak from his injuries and Malfoy easily reversed their positions, with a knee on Harry's ribs to keep him down. Harry tried to lunge forward, but screamed instead when he felt a sharp pain in his ribs. Malfoy was suddenly jerked up by Snape who then began yelling at Harry. "What is wrong with you Potter? Can you not -

keep out of trouble for five minutes? Get up now and follow me like I told you! Draco, come along and get that lip looked at. The rest of you GO TO LUNCH!"

Harry struggled to his feet despite the pain in his body and sneered at Malfoy, whose lip was swollen and bleeding. Ignoring his classmates, he turned and shuffled after Snape, who was already stalking down the corridor. By the time they reached the hospital wing, Harry was gasping for breath and could hardly stand. "Sit, Potter, whilst I get Madam Pomfrey, and keep your hands to yourself." Harry did as he was told, leaning back on the bed and closing his eyes.

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When Harry woke, it was night time, and he could feel bandages wrapped around his chest. He felt exceedingly better. The pain in his ribs was gone and his body was no longer covered in bruises. Sighing in relief he closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

He woke early the next morning and found Madam Pomfrey bustling around the ward. "Well, Mr. Potter, you look to be feeling much better. How do you feel?"

"Good, thank you Madam Pomfrey. Do you think I could go now?"

"Yes that should be fine. Do be careful, Mr. Potter. I don't want to see you in here again anytime soon."

"Yes ma'am" Harry grinned and slipped off the bed. He pulled on his shirt, which he realised, now had a large bloodstain on it, and left the room. The first person he ran into was, of course, the last person he wanted to see. "Ah, Potter. Going to live, I see. How unfortunate." Snape sneered at Harry's clothes and he blushed. "If that's all sir, I'd like to go to breakfast."

"No, that is not all Potter. The headmaster wishes to see you tonight after dinner. Then, after you have finished with him, you will have detention with me. That is all."

"Detention! Why should I have detention?"

"Perhaps because you attacked another student, Mr. Potter? Caused physical harm to that student? I think that is reason enough."

"He started it, and it's not like he didn't get in a shot."

"Actually, Mr. Potter, Mr. Malfoy did not once strike you, if you cast your mind back to yesterday. He merely restrained you. I would suggest you change your shirt before breakfast." With that Snape stalked off, leaving Harry fuming, and feeling like a child. The fact that Snape was telling the truth made him feel even more ashamed about his outburst. Grinding his teeth, Harry made his way to the tower, which was mercifully empty, and changed into another shirt before making his way to the Great Hall. He hardly wanted to face his classmates dressed as he was, but he hadn't eaten a decent thing in the last five days, and he was starving. Entering the Great Hall, he nearly turned and left immediately when all talk stopped and nearly every face in the Hall turned to look at him. But he gritted his teeth, and, flushing in embarrassment, took a seat at the end of the table.



Aware of the still silent faces turned towards him, he took some bacon and toast and began eating. As soon as he took the first bite, whispers broke out, and very shortly everyone was again engaged in -

conversation, though most were probably talking about him. He was so focussed on his meal that he didn't even notice when Ron and Hermione sat down near him until they talked. "Harry?" said Hermione timidly. Harry glanced up at the two sitting across and smiled. "Hey, guys."

"Harry, what happened? We saw you yesterday. Who-"

"Drop it." He said shortly. He did not want to talk about that now. Or any other time, really.

"But-"

"I said drop it."

"Fine mate, fine." Said Ron. "We were just worried about you mate."

Harry nodded and asked, "So, what classes are you guys taking this year?" Ron and Hermione exchanged a look, but answered the questions he asked, and didn't bring up the subject of what had happened to him again. A little later McGonagall came to talk to Harry about his timetable. "Mr Potter, I need you to tell me what classes you intend to take at NEWT level. "Er... I'm not exactly sure Professor. I'm not sure which ones I can take. I haven't seen my OWL results yet."

McGonagall frowned. "They should have been sent to you."

"Well, they were. I just didn't get around to reading them and then I er... lost them."

"You lost them? Honestly Mr. Potter, what are we going to do with you? Well, there will be a copy of your results in my office. I know for a fact you will be able to take transfiguration, and that is first up for you today. I will have your results for you in that class."

“Thankyou Professor.”

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At the end of Transfiguration Harry hung back to get his results and timetable. With a feeling of trepidation, Harry unfolded the letter McGonagall handed to him. His face split into a grin as he read his results. He had done badly in a few, but the important ones he had done well in. He was extremely surprised to see that he could continue in Potions. His dream of becoming an auror wasn't over!

History of Magic: D

Charms: E

Transfiguration: E

Divination: T

Astronomy: A

Potions: O

Care of Magical Creatures: O

Defence Against the Dark Arts: O

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Herbology: E

Harry decided to continue on with charms, transfiguration, potions, defence, herbology, and astronomy. Looking at his timetable, he realised he was now several minutes late for Potions. He smiled as he thought about the look on Snape's face when he found out Harry had gotten an Outstanding in his subject. Thanking his transfiguration teacher, Harry hurried down to the dungeons. It was freezing down here, especially in his thin shirt. In an effort to look a little more decent, Harry had worn a shirt that actually fit. Unfortunately, that meant it was an old shirt and was therefore quite thin. Looking down,

he also realised it showed the tops of his trousers, which hung down around his waist and were being held up with a piece of rope. Blushing with shame, Harry opened the door of the Potions lab and walked in. Closing the door behind him, he turned to find the entire class staring at him. Professor Snape, eyebrow raise, asked "Mr. Potter, may I ask what you are doing in my classroom?"

"Sorry I'm late Professor, I had to get my timetable from Professor McGonagall."

"That still does not answer my question. Surely you didn't make it into my class."

Harry scowled. Snape would have been given a list of students who made the class. "Actually sir, I did."

"Well, wonders never cease. In that case its ten points from Gryffindor for your tardiness, and another ten for your appalling dress sense."

Flushing, Harry took a seat next to Hermione, who glanced at him sympathetically. Like McGonagall, and all of their teachers that day, Snape spent the entire lesson lecturing them on what he expected from a NEWT level class. Snape had only accepted those who got O for their OWLS, and the potions class was a very small class. From Gryffindor, only he, Hermione, and surprisingly Seamus, had scraped an O. From Hufflepuff, Hannah Abbott stood alone, and from Ravenclaw only Terry Boot had decided to take the class. Slytherins made up the largest percentage of students. Gregory Goyle, to Harry's surprise sat next to Draco Malfoy, and Theodore Nott and Pansy Parkinson were seated behind them. To their left was Blaise Zabini and Millicent Bulstrode. Obviously Snape favoured his students when it came to marking assignments, though Harry savagely.

.oOo.

After dinner, Harry made his way up to the Headmasters office. He had spent dinner evading annoying questions about his holidays and was preparing himself to do the same for the headmaster. He stood

in front of the gargoyle and realised he had no idea what the password was. Well, he certainly wasn't going to play Dumbledore's little game. He was going to wait ten minutes, and if the headmaster didn't come down and get him, then Harry was going to leave. After all, he must know if someone is waiting outside his office, thought Harry. Ten minutes dragged by, but when it had, Harry huffed and began walking towards Gryffindor tower without a glance back at the gargoyle. "Potter. Where do you think you are going? The headmaster requested to speak with you."

Harry glanced back to see Snape standing in the open doorway next to the Gargoyle. "Well the Headmaster neglected to tell me the password to his office, and if he thinks I'm going to stand there for even a minute and play stupid guessing games with a piece of stone, then he is sadly mistaken."

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Snape raised an eyebrow. "If you are quite done, the headmaster is waiting." Harry scowled and followed Snape up the winding stair case.

"Ah, Harry, my boy, how are you feeling this evening. I hear you were in quite a state when Severus found you at your relatives home. Is there anything you would like to tell me, my boy?"

Harry scowled. "I am not 'your boy'. And no, there's nothing I want to tell you."

Dumbledore frowned and shared a look with the Potions Master. "Harry, Harry. I know you must be angry with me, but it is for your own good that you must return to your relatives."

"I have no problem with my relatives." A lie, but Harry had no wish to discuss this with the headmaster.

Dumbledore looked disappointed but let the subject drop. "Have you been having visions recently Harry?"

Harry shrugged. Of course he had. Dumbledore knew he hadn't learned occlumency, so Harry settled for the short answer. "Yes."

"Have you seen anything I should know about? Anything you wish to tell me?"

Harry could hear the eagerness in Dumbledore's voice and it made him angry. It could remember that same eagerness in his voice when he had asked anyone to tell him things, things he had desperately needed to know. "No."

"Harry, again, I know you are angry with me, but this information could help us greatly, save lives even."

"I'm sure it could."

"Potter," snapped Snape, "Do not take that tone with the headmaster. He deserves respect. I suggest you show it."

Harry's anger exploded. "Well now he knows what it feels like to have things kept from him, things that could 'save lives even.' Maybe if he'd shown me some respect, instead of treating me like a child, and like some pawn, I would show him some. But nooo, he'd never tell me anything, not until it's too late to help. Not until people are dead. At first I blamed you, for Sirius being dead. It was your fault for not teaching me occlumency, but then I realised, you were only trying to help me. You were doing- maybe not your best- but you were trying at least. Maybe if I'd listened to you and tried harder I might have done better, and Sirius might still be alive. And then, I realised it wasn't my fault either, at least not entirely. I did the best I could with what information I had. You-" and here he finally turned to face Dumbledore, "-you continue to string me along, leading me on with the promise of a bit more information if I continue to be a good little boy and do what you want all the time. If you'd bothered to tell me that Voldemort might try to lure me to the ministry, if you had told me that Sirius would never be there I would have known it wasn't a true vision. I would have known it was false and I wouldn't have gone. But you give me the barest minimum of details, and only when you think I'm about to crack. Well guess what? I've had it. You can go to hell!"

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At his last word, the window exploded into the room, showering them with glass. Harry lost his furious focus and the objects that had, unknown to him, been hovering in the air dropped to the ground, some of the more delicate objects smashing into a thousand tiny pieces.

Snape and Dumbledore were staring at him, eyes wide. "Good grief, Potter, you do have a temper, don't you."

Snape was going to make light of this? Harry jumped up, and without another word ran from the room.

"Whatsssss wrong, Harry?"hissed the Snake.

"The headmassster. He doesssn't care about me. I am jussst a pawn to him in his chesssgame with Voldemort." Harry fumed.

"Pleassse don't be sssad Harryyyy... I could bitesss him for youuuu?"

Harry smiled grimly. "I apreccciate the offer, sssnake, but that would be good for neither of ussss. Dessspite the fact that he isss using me, he hasssss done good for othersss." Harry sighed. "I think he does care about me, really. I'm just angry. I'm glad I have you to talk to, sssnake. I couldn't sssay these thingsss to any of my other friendsssss. Would you like to be my pet, snake? Ssstay with me?"

"I would like that very much masssster."

Harry smiled at the little snake. "What shall I call you then, my friend? You need a name."

"Harry! My name shall be Harry, like yoursssss." Harry chuckled.

"You can't have the same name a same, ssssweet one."

"But I know no other namessss Harry. You choossssse."

"What about Salazzzar? He wassss a founder of thisss school, and he had the ssssame gift as liiii. He could talk to snakesss. It isss quite fitting."

"It soundssss mysterioussss massster. I like it."

"Salazzzar it is then, my friend."

He continued to storm through the castle, not even realising where he was going. Eventually, he sank exhausted onto the cold stone floor and realised he was in the dungeons. He sighed. He had detention with Snape. 'May as well go. It's not as if this day could possibly get any worse.' Heaving himself up, he made his way to Snape's office and was glad when his knock received no answer. At least he wouldn't lose points for not being late. He could feel a dull throbbing in his temples and knew he had a headache coming on. "Potter!" Harry jumped in surprise. "Sir."

"Inside."

Harry followed Snape into his the potions lab and was set to scrubbing cauldrons. There was silence, but Harry was uncomfortably aware of the unfathomable glances Snape would occasionally send his way. Two long hours later Snape stood. "That's enough Potter. You may go."

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Sighing with relief, Harry stood and had his hand on the door when Snape said, "I am going to Diagon Alley tomorrow for some things. The headmaster has requested that I take you with me so you can get what you need. Until then you will have to make do with what you have." He sneered at Harry's clothes before waving his hand in dismissal.

.oOo.

The next day was not pleasant for Harry. He hated the questioning glances he received from pretty much every student in the school, and the sarcastic comments from the Slytherins. Everyone wanted to know where he had been the first day of school, and why the 'Boy-Who-Lived' was dressed in rags. Eventually, he had snapped at Ron

and Hermione, because they just would not let the subject drop, and they were now not talking to him.

Harry sat with Neville in Transfiguration. They had had herbology first, so his lack of wand and writing equipment had not been a problem. Now, however, Harry was worried. Neville had lent him a quill and some sheets of parchment, for which Harry was grateful, but he doubted his lack of wand would go unnoticed by anyone, let alone McGonagall. For the first half of the lesson, McGonagall had had them take notes, but for the second half they were to practice turning a pumpkin into a puppy. Harry slouched in his chair scowling as his classmates worked at the task. Harry's mood soured further when Professor Snape entered the classroom and began a conversation with Professor McGonagall. "Harry," said Neville, "don't you want a go?" He gestured at the pumpkin, which he had only managed to give a tail that would occasionally wag. "No thanks, Neville. I don't really feel up to it." Unfortunately for Harry, Professor McGonagall heard his comment and turned on him, lips pursed. "Mr. Potter, I am afraid that is really not a good enough reason for your laziness. Let me see you try."

Harry's scowl deepened. "I can't."

"Do not look at me like that, Potter. And I don't know how you can say you can't do it when you have yet to try."

"It isn't that I don't want to try, Professor. I just don't have a wand."

McGonagall huffed. "If you left your wand in your dormitory, you should have asked to go and get it."

"It's not there. I lost it."

Harry heard Hermione's indignant squeak. "Harry, the phoenix feather wand!"

McGonagall had exactly the same thoughts, and her face paled slightly. "The phoenix feather wand? How could you be so careless as to lose that wand?"



Snape decided to step in, much to Harry's disgust. "What Mr. Potter is trying to say, Minerva, is that his relatives burned all of his belongings, wand included." Harry glared at Snape as a blush rose on his cheeks. 'Stupid smirking bastard,' thought Harry. A stunned silence greeted Snape's words before a few of the Slytherins began to giggle. "Oh, Harry, why didn't you tell us?" asked Hermione.

-

Harry shrugged her hand off of his arm and stormed from the classroom. He was halfway down the hall before he realised someone was following him. He spun and saw that it was Snape. "What do you want?" he spat.

"Manners, Potter. In case you don't remember, I told you last night we would be going to Diagon Alley today, so whenever you are ready..."

Growling, Harry followed Snape out of the castle. They made their way to Hogsmeade in a strained silence, then portkeyed to Diagon Alley. Their first stop was Madam Malkin's. "Sir I have no money. Shouldn't we go to Gringotts first?"

"The headmaster has taken the time to get some money for you." He dropped a sack into Harry's hand. Harry felt himself getting angry. "What – how did he get money from my account?"

Snape glanced at Harry curiously before replying. "Whilst you are at school he is your guardian. He was simply doing you a favour."

"He has no right. That's my money. How did he even get it without a key? I am so sick of people thinking they can control everything that goes on in my life!"

"If you are quite finished your rant, Mr. Potter. I have better things to do with my time than listen to you whine. If you have a problem, take it up with the headmaster."

Furious, Harry kept his mouth shut as Madam Malkin fitted his robes. After leaving that shop, they bought Harry's school books and some writing equipment.

Next, Harry dragged Snape along on an unintended visit to Quality Quidditch Supplies. Snape was clearly unimpressed, but, as Harry reminded him, he was on the Quidditch team and therefore needed a new broom. Along with new gloves, Harry bought the newest broom on the shelves. It was called the Dragonfire, and far outstripped his old broom. He was sad he no longer had the broom Sirius had given him, but he couldn't wait to see Malfoy's face when he saw this one. Snape just scowled and Harry suspected he was not thrilled with the idea of a rival team having such a good broom. Harry grinned.

Snape then led him to Ollivander's. "Sir, are there any other wand makers?" Harry asked.

"Yes, of course. Most people in England prefer Ollivander's, but there are other makers of wands. In fact, there is another at the end of the alley, Bezzemer's, I believe they are called. Not well known, and much more expensive than Ollivander's. They make wands to order and have a... reputation."

"Wands to order? What do you mean?"

"Sometimes people want wands to perform a specific task. The wand will be very powerful, but will only perform that one task."

"Why would someone want a wand that's only good for one thing?"

Snape raised an eyebrow at him. "Perhaps because they don't want to risk using their own wand, Mr. Potter."

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"Oh. I see." Harry shivered. Wands for a specific task, never to be used again. He could only imagine what sort of 'task' would require that secrecy.

"Ah, Mr. Potter. I was expecting you. Dumbledore has already been to talk to me about the unfortunate incident with your wand. Follow me please."

Harry scowled at yet another example of Dumbledore's interference and followed Ollivander to the counter.

"Try."

Harry took the wand, and immediately felt a tingle in his fingers. It was not the warmth he had felt when he held his old wand, but it was there all the same. He swished it, and sparks flew from the end. Strange. It had taken ages last time, to select a wand. "Very good. It seems this is still the wand for you. Dumbledore came to me as soon as he heard about your wand yesterday morning and brought with him another feather from that phoenix of his. This is an exact replica of your former wand."

Harry felt a weight settle in his belly. How dare he! Could the man not meddle in his life for once? Harry turned to Ollivander. "I'd like to try another, please."

"Snape groaned. "Potter, do not be difficult."

"I want another wand." Harry was adamant.

Ollivander spoke. "Mr. Potter, a person may have only one wand at a time. This wand has given you its allegiance. No other wand will work for you as well as this one will."

Harry came to a quick decision. "Fine. How much?" he snapped, and handed Ollivander the amount he was told. As soon as Snape and Harry left the shop, Harry pulled the wand from his pocket and with a slight feeling of sadness snapped the wand clean in half.

"Potter! What the hell did you do that for? You idiot child!" the look on Snape's face was priceless, thought Harry. A cross between surprise and rage. Harry grinned. "I guess I need a new wand professor. Don you think we could try that other shop? Bezzemer's, wasn't it?" With that, Harry took off as fast as he could with all his books in the direction Snape had indicated earlier. Snape caught up with him easily and Harry listened to the angry professor lecture him all the way to the wand store. Upon entering the store however, both wizards were quiet as the oppressive silence weighed down on them.

A man appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, startling both Snape and Harry. "Can I help you gentlemen?" Harry swallowed. There was something about the man that made him slightly nervous. His dark eyes seemed to see right through him, and his appearance was dark and intimidating. Actually, Harry was strongly reminded of Snape. "Er... I guess. I need a wand." The man bowed. "Of course. If you would follow me. Is there a particular use for this wand, or is it for general use?" Harry remembered what Snape had said earlier and hastened to reply. "General use."

"Very well." The man smirked as if he knew exactly what Harry was thinking and Harry was again reminded strongly of Snape. He was uncomfortably aware that the man was now standing staring at him. After a full minute the man nodded and made a noise that indicated he was pleased, before -

turning and walking into a back room. Harry glanced at Snape, who was looking around the shop with obvious interest. "Sir, how long does it take to make a wand?"

Snape spared him the briefest of glances before turning his eyes back to the contents of the cluttered shop. "It depends. Not long, I would hope. The headmaster is going to be most displeased when you return with a wand that is different to the one he intended." Snape seemed almost pleased with the prospect and Harry scowled. A full hour later, Harry had heard no noise from the back of the shop and both he and Snape were sitting side by side on the only lounge available. Snape, having looked upon every item in the shop was now throwing dirty looks at Harry. "This is ridiculous. What could possibly be taking so long?" Just as Harry was about to reply, the mysterious man walked swiftly through the door holding a wand. "I do apologize for the wait. It was a difficult process to make this wand, given the ingredients. Come, try it, give it a wave." This man had the same air of excitement Ollivander had when it took a customer a long time to find a wand, and Harry found he suddenly wasn't so scary. Harry grinned, got up and walked to the counter where he grasped the wand. He felt a thrill of power unlike anything he had ever felt before. It raced up his arm and sent shockwaves down his spine, radiating throughout his entire body. "Wow," he breathed. The man smirked. "I take it you are satisfied?"

Harry grinned. "Yes, sir!"

"Excellent. An odd combination, that one. Yew, sheathed in Yggdrasil, also known as Laerad, with a core of dragon heartstring soaked in basilisk venom. A combination I have never seen before, but a very powerful combination."

"Interesting indeed," murmured Snape, taking the wand from Harry and caressing it almost lovingly. "How much," he asked, handing the wand back to Harry.

"36 galleons, 6 sickles. A little on the expensive side, I'm afraid."

Harry's eyes widened at the price but he shrugged and handed over the amount, before thanking the man and following Snape.

Their last stop was the Apothecary. Snape stopped him at the door. "I will get your ingredients for you if you wish, seeing as I also have some purchases to make here." Harry handed Snape his money bag and leaned against the wall to wait for Snape. His attention wandered and he noticed a small alleyway leading off of the main alley. He recognised it from last time he had been there. Knockturn Alley. He felt a sudden curiosity. Before he could think better of it, he ducked across to the shady alley. Glancing around him to be sure no one was watching, Harry slipped quickly into Knockturn Alley. It may have been his imagination, but Knockturn Alley seemed to be shrouded in darkness, and a blanket of silence had descended as soon as he stepped in. Giving a mental shrug, Harry hurried forward. Last time he'd been here he had been scared out of his wits. This time however, his overriding curiosity killed any fear he had. He didn't have much time so he slipped into the first decent shop he saw. It turned out to be a bookshop, dark and dusty and deathly silent. Keeping a good grip on his bags, Harry slipped into an aisle and looked up at the shelves. The first book he saw he was surprised to recognise, though not surprised to find it here. 'Magicke Moste Evile.' He shivered as he remembered the graphic details and images he had seen in that book. Harry scanned the shelf and his eyes came to rest on a fairly thick book. He pulled it out and glanced at the cover. -

‘The Dark Arts: An Historic Account.’ It looked like a fairly old book and he found a year marked on the spine: 1878. The hard cover was dirty and spotted and one corner was clearly burned. Despite the damage Harry was intrigued and he carefully opened the cover. He felt a thrill of magic as he did so, felt it surround him, dancing and caressing his own magic. It made him feel... powerful, and strangely, ecstatically happy. He laughed. Then remembering where he was, he quickly shut his mouth, but grinned. He liked this book. “Can I be of some assistance?” Harry nearly screamed when he heard the voice. Breathing quickly, he turned to see an elderly man, gazing at him from behind the counter. What unnerved Harry most were the man’s eyes. They were milky and bloodshot, and his pupils and irises could hardly be seen. The man was blind. ‘Good.’ thought Harry. It certainly wouldn’t do for anyone to know he’d been in here. “Er... yes, actually. I’d like to purchase this book thank you. And um... this one too.” Harry quickly grabbed a second book that had suddenly caught his eye off the shelf and walked the short distance to the counter. Two minutes later, Harry was back outside the apothecary in Diagon Alley with his latest purchases tucked safely beneath his school books. Minutes later, Snape exited and thrust another bag at Harry. “Let’s go.” Harry followed him, glad to be going back to school. He had missed lunch and was starving. By the time they got back to school the sun was setting and dinner was about to begin. Harry left Snape without a word and hurried up to the dormitory to change into a new robe. He pulled out his new wand. It really was beautiful. The Yggdrasil, a type of ash, he thought, was beautiful, and the wand was engraved with runes that Harry had never seen before. He’d never seen a wand with runes before. Perhaps he would make up with Hermione and she could tell him what they meant. The wand felt familiar to him, and was comfortable and warm in his hand. He had always thought the phoenix wand had felt that way, but now that he held this one, the memory of the old one felt cold and unfriendly. This wand was definitely better suited to him. Stashing the wand in his pocket, he made his way to the Great Hall to eat.

Next Chapter: Dragon in the Dungeons. I’ve written it already, but I want to go over it once more. I’ll probably post it in about a week.

Anything recognisable belongs to J.K. Rowling.

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## Dragon in the Dungeons

As soon as Harry sat down at the Gryffindor table he was accosted by Ron and Hermione, who wasted no time in begging him to forgive them for their questions. Harry, tired of petty arguments apologised as well, for not telling them, and he and Ron spent the evening insulting Snape for being an evil greasy git, and Malfoy for being a pretentious ponce. Feeling exceptionally better after dessert, the trio made their way back up to the common room and spent the evening playing exploding snap.

oOoOo

Harry woke late on Thursday morning and dressed quickly. He had experienced a relatively good night, waking from a vision only once. Thankfully, it hadn't been a particularly bad vision. Harry had no time for breakfast and wondered vaguely why Ron hadn't woken him. Shrugging, he grabbed his books and ran through the corridors to Charms. He was looking forward to this lesson; it was the first chance he'd had to try out his new wand. He arrived just in time and Professor Flitwick set them to a bit of practical revision. Harry was pleased with his new wand. It seemed an extension of his own arm, and casting charms seemed easier than it had ever been, though that could simply have been because he knew all these charms already. On the way to potions, Hermione admired his new wand, Hermione saying she had never seen those particular runes before. "In fact, I've never seen any wand with runes on it. You should ask a teacher about it Harry, perhaps one of them will know. What's the wand made from?"

"It's made from yew, sheathed in Yggdrasil. The core is dragon heartstring soaked in basilisk venom."

"That's interesting... two kinds of wood. I wonder why. I think we learnt about Yggdrasil in herbology last year, didn't we. It's supposed to be extremely rare. I didn't know Basilisk venom was used in wands,

but that's an even rarer ingredient. This wand must have been expensive."

"It was a little over 32 galleons. My old one only cost 7."

"Well Potter, I'm surprised you could afford it. Although, I suppose your parents must have left you a fair heap of galleons when they kicked it?" Malfoy drawled, a smirk on his face.

Harry whirled around. He hadn't even heard Malfoy behind them. "Go to hell, Malfoy! At least my parents aren't rotting in prison." At Harry's words, Malfoy paled. "I'm going to g—"

He was cut off by Snape. "Ten points from Gryffindor for antagonising another student, Mr. Potter. Everyone inside," snapped Snape as he unlocked the classroom. Grumbling about Snape's unfairness, Harry took a seat with Ron and Hermione at a table far removed from Snape's own desk and prepared himself for the lesson.

oOo

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After dinner that night Harry sequestered himself in the boys' dormitory and pulled the curtains around his bed before pulling out the two books he had bought in Knockturn Alley. The larger one that he had skimmed through in the bookshop, 'The Dark Arts: An Historic Account' was practically an encyclopaedia of dark curses. The writing was small and cramped, and after the name of each curse there was a pronunciation guide and a detailed history and description of the curse. Overall, it was a highly interesting book, if a little disturbing. Still, if he had any chance of defeating Voldemort, he had to know what he was up against. Putting that book to the side, Harry picked up the smaller book and ran his hands over the cover. It seemed to be bound in leather of some sort, perhaps dragon skin. On the spine there was a crest, but Harry couldn't really make out any detail, it was so small. There was no title or author so he flipped it open to the first page with writing. Like the last book, the writing was small, though not so cramped. It was an elegant script and the language, though English was Old English, and written very strangely, like someone



had written a sentence and then mixed it around. It was still understandable, but he had to read some of the lines several times before he got the gist of them. This book also seemed to detail spells and their history, but there were also a few potions that he had never heard of before. In fact, he didn't think he had heard of even one of the spells either. Intrigued, he spent several hours perusing the book and practicing more than a few of the spells. It was early in the morning when Harry finally shoved the book to the end of his bed and collapsed onto his pillow for a few hours of sleep.

oOo

Harry gazed down upon the ailing man and laughed a high, cruel laugh. "This is what becomes of a traitor," he hissed. The man began to beg, "Please, my Lord. I live to serve you. I-I will do anything. Please!" But Harry just laughed. This man was pathetic, a worm to be squashed. Harry knelt and ran a cold finger along the man's jaw and forced his head up to look him in the eye. "You are a coward and a liar, Bromwell, and you will be punished as an example to others. Lord Voldemort does not easily forgive treachery. Crucio!" Harry smiled as the man in front of him writhed and screamed, and then he began to laugh, a loud, maniacal laugh that sent shivers down the spines of the men that stood watching.

Many miles away, four boys were wakened from their sleep by the cackling coming from behind the closed curtains that hid Harry Potter.

Harry was ecstatically happy, the traitor was found, now dead, His plans could carry on... someone was calling him... "Harry, Harry mate, wake up!" Harry gasped and slapped a hand to his burning forehead as he sat up straight in his bed, gasping for breath. "Ron! "

"Yeah, it's me. You right mate? You were laughing, it was... scary. You wouldn't stop." Ron leaned in and said in a strained whisper, "Vision?"

"Yeah. I'm alright now. Sorry guys. Go back to sleep. Thanks Ron."

Harry lay back in his bed and sighed. His scar burned fiercely, but not as badly as when he played the victim. He tried not to laugh.

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oOo

That morning at breakfast Ron kept shooting Harry worried looks, as did Hermione, which led Harry to believe he had told her about the vision. None of them said anything however, for which Harry was grateful. His thoughts were interrupted by the welcome arrival of Hedwig. It felt like ages since he had seen her and he smiled broadly, patting her on the head. She rubbed her head against his shoulder and accepted the piece of bacon he offered her. "Hello girl, it's been a while." Suddenly, another owl, a tawny this time, landed next to Harry's plate. This one had a letter and Harry removed it, wondering who was sending him mail this early in the term. Probably Remus. This was confirmed when he unrolled the letter and began to read.

Harry,

How are you doing? I have not had the chance to contact you for some time, but be assured I have not forgotten you. I know that last term you blamed yourself for Sirius' death, but believe me when I say it was not. Sirius knew the risk involved in going to the Ministry, and while I'm sure he did not intend to die that night, I believe he would be glad he went down fighting. Do not mourn him forever, Harry. He loved you and would want you to be happy. I am always here if you need to talk, so don't hesitate to contact me for whatever reason.

Moony.

Harry felt a prickling at the corners of his eyes as he thought about Sirius, but he was glad to hear from Remus. He tucked the letter into his shirt and glanced at his watch. It was nearly time for class. He turned to Ron and Hermione. "We should get going for defence or we're gonna be late." This was the first defence class he had attended, having missed Monday. He had a thought as they walked. "Hey, guys, who's the teacher? I haven't heard yet." Ron and Hermione exchanged a look that didn't help Harry's stress levels. "Guys?"

“Well, er... we’ve got Snape, actually.” Answered Hermione. Harry stopped dead.

“What! How can we have Snape for two subjects? He doesn’t have enough time to teach two subjects.”

“Well, apparently Dumbledore wanted us to have a half-decent teacher this year, and he couldn’t find anyone else that fit the bill. So instead of teaching the whole school potions, Snape’s got everyone third year and above, plus NEWT level defence students. Some bird named Bletchley’s got all the younger students for both subjects.” replied Ron

Harry was torn. On the one hand, Defence had always been his favourite subject, but he was quite sure Snape would do his best to make Harry miserable. On the other hand, he had no doubt Snape would be the best teacher they’d had, hands down. So, to Ron and Hermione’s concerned stares, his only reply was a scowl and a “Hmph.”

Harry was soon proved correct after only the first twenty minutes of class he had both lost ten points from his house (for absolutely no reason) and been more thoroughly engrossed than he had ever been in any class. He hung off of Snape’s every word like he was a man dying of thirst and Snape’s words were drops of water, and when class ended he had written more than 20 inches of -

notes. If Harry had thought Snape had a passion for potions, it was nothing to the way he spoke about the Dark Arts.

oOo

During lunch, Harry was tapped on the shoulder and looked round to find Colin Creevey. “What’s up Colin?”

“Hey Harry, Dumbledore just wanted me to give you a message. He wants you to come see him after lunch today.”

“Okay, thanks Colin.” With that, Colin bounced away and Harry turned back to scowl at his food. He suddenly didn’t feel much like

eating. Getting up, he said goodbye to Ron and Hermione and headed for the Headmaster's office. He was still angry at the headmaster, but it wouldn't do for them to be at odds with each other.

"Ah, Harry. How was your trip to Diagon Alley, if I may ask?"

"Oh, good. I got all the stuff I needed."

"Severus informed me of the incident at Ollivanders."

"Yes sir, I appreciate you going to the trouble of sending a new feather for me, but I really didn't want another wand that was useless against Voldemort's. It felt different, too. It was familiar, but not the same. It felt... awkward, I guess, in my hand, like it wasn't going to work as well as my old one."

Dumbledore inclined his head. "It is only expected I suppose. It has been several years since you chose your first wand, and you have undoubtedly changed. You are a different person. I should have realised the wand would not be the same."

"It's alright. Like I said, I do appreciate it... and I'd like to apologise for my behaviour the other day. I was angry and I had no right to speak to you like that."

"Perhaps you did Harry. Everything I have done, I thought the best for you. I have begun to see that I may have been wrong. I do however, stand by my decision to send you back to your relatives. You know the protection they offer, it is unlike that you will receive anywhere else."

"I know sir. I don't blame you for anything."

Dumbledore smiled and his eyes twinkled. "There is one other thing, my boy. Your friends tell me you are still having visions."

"Yes sir. I didn't really do very well in occlumency last year."

"I do think it would be best for you to resume your lessons with Professor Snape. He really is the best there is, and it would only do you good to get a decent night's sleep. You do look rather peaky."

Harry sighed. He really was tired, and the visions were horrible. "Yes sir, I suppose you're right. When will I be starting?"

-

"Ah, well. That is up to Professor Snape of course. I believe it would be best for you to go and ask him yourself if he would agree to teach you again. He will, I'm sure, but it would be good if you were to ask him yourself."

Harry's stomach dropped. Ask Snape himself? He could already see the smug look on Snape's face as Harry admitted that he needed his help.

"Alright Professor. I'll see him tonight."

"Very good, my boy. I assure you, Professor Snape will appreciate the request coming from you yourself, instead of me on your behalf."

As if, Harry thought sourly, but he nodded and stood to leave.

"One more thing Harry. Do not hesitate to come and talk with me if there is anything at all on your mind." He smiled that grandfatherly smile and Harry jerked his head in reply.

"Yes Professor, I will. Thankyou."

oOo

The last lesson for the day was double potions and Harry determined to stay behind after and ask Snape about lessons. When the bell rang, Harry hung back as the class filed out. It never took long for the potions classroom to be vacated, and all too soon Harry found himself alone with the Professor. Harry hesitantly approached the desk. "Er, professor?"

Snape's head snapped up to reveal his unfriendly glare. "What, Potter?"

Harry took a deep breath. "It's just... I was wondering if maybe you would agree to teach me occlumency again, Professor?"

Snape leaned back in his chair, hands clasped behind his head, and just as Harry had known he would, smirked, with a smug look at Harry. "So, you require my assistance do you? Tell me, Potter, why would I be inclined to help you in this matter. You certainly didn't try very hard last year."

Harry desperately wanted to yell at the man, but he knew that would get him nowhere. "No sir, I didn't." Harry could have laughed at the surprise that showed on Snape's face then. "I didn't really... understand why I needed to learn it. I mean, I knew the reason, but my visions have gotten much worse since then, and last year I didn't know that Voldemort would send me false visions. I need to learn it."

Snape leaned forward then, now with a serious expression on his face. He frowned slightly as he clasped his hands in front of him. "I demand the utmost respect in my classes, Potter, and the utmost attention and work ethic. I will agree to teach you again, but you will work hard at it. I will not accept excuses if you neglect to practice, nor will I think twice about ending these lessons if you waste my time or fail to follow my instruction. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir. I appreciate you taking the time to help me, sir."

-

Snape looked surprised again, but nodded his head in acceptance of the thanks before waving his hand in dismissal. Harry exited the room and leaned against the wall. "Well, Salzzzz, that could have gone much worssse. He was almosstt friendly. At leasstt, asss close to friendly asss he'll ever be to meee."

"I like him massster."

“Aaah, pleassse, Salzzzz. Don’t say thingssss like that to meeee,” Harry joked. “You’re killing meee.”

“Massster, I am hungry for mousiessss. I can smellssss them. Tasssty, crunchy...” Salazar flicked his tongue and Harry turned in the direction the little snake was facing. He began walking in that direction, and the corridors became darker and darker. Harry walked further and further. He had never been so far into the dungeons. He didn’t want to get lost, so he stopped and sat down, trying to memorise the way he had come. He could hear the almost silent skittering of mice or rats and he said to Salazar, “Go hunt, my friend. I will wait for you here. Take ass long ass you want.” He smiled as Salazar crawled down his arm onto the floor and slithered to a crack in the stone walls. He disappeared and Harry pulled out ‘The Dark Arts: An historic Account’ from his bag. He pulled out a spare bit of parchment and quill and began to copy down a few spells he thought would be useful to learn. He had been reading the book every spare chance he got, always out of the sight of anyone who might look, and had found it highly interesting and informative. After twenty minutes straight of copying down spells, Harry stood up and practiced a few. He found these spells came to him quite easily, and his wand yielded no resistance to any spells he cast. After a full hour, he finally heard Salazar’s quiet hiss. “Massster, sssorry for taking sssoooo long. It wassss hard to deccide which little moussssy to eat. Ssssoo many yummy little onesss...”

“It’s alright. I wasss practissing anyway. Shall we go?” He knelt and Salazar crawled up his arm and curled around his shoulder. Slinging his bag over his shoulder and picking up his book, Harry began making his way out of the dungeons. He soon came to the conclusion that he was lost.

After five minutes of directionless wandering, Harry slumped against a wall. “Well, Salazzzar. We are well and truly losst.”

Sighing, he turned around and jumped about three feet in the air when he came face to face with none other than Draco Malfoy. “Shite, Malfoy! You scared the hell out of me.”

Draco smirked. "Yes, I could tell by that awfully shrill scream that just blew my eardrums out. What are you doing wandering the dungeons at this time of night?"

"I got lost. You shouldn't be out this late either. Nice clothes, by the way."

Malfoy sneered. He was dressed in pyjamas; long flannelette pants and matching shirt, with a cloak wrapped around his shoulders. His feet were bare. "You must be absolutely freezing in that."

"It is absolutely none of your business, Potter, if I decide to take a midnight stroll. Besides, I'm a prefect. I should take points from you. Why were you even this far into the dungeons in the first place? Even you wouldn't have gotten lost from the potions classroom."

Harry shrugged. "I was looking for somewhere quiet to think."

-

Malfoy snorted. "Think? Right. Now I know you're lying." Suddenly, Malfoy caught sight of the book tucked under Harry's arm. His eyes widened in recognition. "What are you doing with that? Where'd you even get it? That's Dark Arts, Potter."

"Mind your own business, Malfoy." Harry turned and began to walk away. If Malfoy had been going this way, hopefully it would lead somewhere he knew. He was stopped, however, when the book was suddenly jerked out of his grasp. "I know several people who would be very interested to know that the great Harry Potter is reading books like this," Malfoy drawled.

"Give it back now!" growled Harry. If this got back to anyone...

"No, I don't think I will, actually. I've always wanted to read this book. It's really quite a rare book."

Harry scowled and grabbed for the book, but Malfoy was faster. With a look of glee, he danced around Harry and ran up the corridor, his bare feet making little sound on the cold stones. "Come back NOW, Malfoy!" roared Harry, running after the Slytherin. To his surprise, Malfoy skidded to a halt, and Harry thought he might actually be



going to give the book back. His heart dropped, however, when Malfoy smirked, raised his hand, and knocked on wooden panel next to an old painting. The painting was richly coloured, but dark. It was of a dank forest, and next to the foremost tree stood a tall, thin wizard, who exuded an air of power. Curled around his neck and watching them beadily was a large green serpent. Not four seconds later, the door was wrenched open and Harry almost cried when he saw Snape's ominous form silhouetted against the dim light.

"Draco, what are you doing out of bed at this time of night, and why aren't you dressed properly? You must be freezing," said Snape, unknowingly mimicking Harry. It was strange to hear Snape say anything to a student without derision in his voice, but now Snape seemed almost friendly. Then he spotted Harry and his face took on a scowl. "Potter," he growled. His eyes flicked between the two boys as Draco answered. "Sir, I was patrolling the dungeons, when I found Potter lurking just up the corridor. He was reading this." Draco held out the book with a flourish and Snape's eyes widened in surprise. He glanced up at Harry, and Harry scowled, folding his arms across his chest in a defensive gesture and averting his eyes. Snape took the book without a word and flipped through the first few pages. "Where did you get this, Potter?" he asked softly.

"Bought it." grunted Harry. He was never going to see the book again. Why hadn't he just put it in his bag when he was finished with it?

"You bought it? Where and when, did you have the chance to buy a book such as this?"

Harry's eyes flicked in Snape's direction as he muttered; "Diagon Alley."

"You lie. There is nowhere in Diagon Alley you would be able to buy this book." Snape was starting to sound angry now and Harry cringed.

"Er, well, it was Knockturn Alley, actually. When you- when you took me to get my school things."

A look of rage crossed Snape's face. "The apothecary! I let you out of my sight for an instant and you run off to Knockturn Alley to buy

books on Dark Magic? You idiot child! One would have thought you had learned last year not to run off by yourself. You could have run into anyone in Knockturn Alley! And buying this book. Have you any idea how dark the magic in this book is? You will have detention -

with me, tomorrow night, Potter. Also 50 points from Gryffindor. You are coming with me to see the headmaster immediately."

"No, sir, please. You can't tell him! I won't read it anymore. I've only had it a few days a-

"I do not care how long you have had it, Potter. The fact that you even bought it confounds me. We are going now to the headmaster's office and I don't want to hear another word from you until we get there." Snape turned to Draco and to Harry's anger and dismay, handed him the book. "Draco, take this book inside for me, then off to bed. It is late. Oh, and 20 points to Slytherin."

Snape turned and stalked up the corridor, and Harry shot a filthy look at Malfoy, who was wearing an enormous smirk, before stomping after the Potions Master.

The corridors were silent as they walked, and Harry's dread grew with each step.

Reaching the gargoyle, the two wizards stood on the moving staircase and Snape knocked on the office door before entering. "Ah, Severus, Harry. How are the both of you?" To Harry's annoyance, he didn't seem the least bit surprised to see them, despite the lateness of the hour. "Albus, I was in my chambers when Draco knocked on the door. He had caught Potter in the dungeons with a book on the Dark Arts. An Historic Account, I'm sure you know the one."

Dumbledore frowned slightly as he looked at Harry. "This is quite serious, Harry. That is a very dark book. Where did you get it?"

Snape answered for him. "He snuck away whilst I was busy in the apothecary, when we went to Diagon Alley."

“Is there a reason you felt the need to buy a book such as this, Harry?”

“Look, I’m not turning dark or anything,” said Harry, feeling defensive. “You know what that prophecy says. I need to learn that stuff. It’s not like I’m going to off him with a tickling hex, is it?” Dumbledore started to reply, but was cut off by Snape.

“You told him the contents of the prophecy? He is a child! How could you put that on him at this age, with everything he has already been through? My God!” Harry stared at Snape, dumbfounded. “You know about the prophecy?”

“Of course I know about the prophecy, stupid child!”

Harry scowled, however. “I am not a child.”

Snape spun and glared at him. “Well you should be! You are barely sixteen.” He turned to Dumbledore. “He is far too young to be worrying about defeating Dark Lords.” Harry was stunned. Snape was angry at Dumbledore, for him? That had to be a first. Surely Snape didn’t care? Harry snorted at the thought.

Dumbledore spoke next. “Harry, my boy. I think perhaps it is time you returned to your dormitory. I trust you know that this is a course of action you will not pursue. There is no need for you to learn these curses. I think perhaps that Professor Snape is right. I should not have told you about the -

prophecy. We will also need to have a talk about that book, but I think now is not the time. Off to your dormitory now.”

Harry blinked. He was getting off that easy? Standing he nodded to both professors and made his way to Gryffindor tower.

Hi, I know not much really happened in this chapter. Next one should have more ‘stuff.’

Please please review : )

A place to think, or not.

The next day was a Saturday, and Harry would have been completely happy had it not been for the fact that his book had been confiscated and he had a detention with Snape after lunch. He spent the morning chatting with Ron and Hermione, and then played a few games of chess with Ron before they headed to lunch. At half past twelve, Harry stood up and excused himself. Ron and Hermione gave him sympathetic looks as he walked off in the direction of the dungeons.

Snape had already finished lunch and called out "Enter!" as soon as Harry knocked. He did so, looking around at the dark office. It had hardly changed since the first time he had been in here. An assortment of things in glass jars adorned the walls of the office, only now, after five years of schooling, Harry recognised a few. It didn't make them any less disgusting.

Snape spoke. "Take a seat, Potter. We have a few things to discuss." Harry did so and turned all of his attention to Snape. "Will I be scrubbing cauldrons, sir?"

Snape sneered. "So enthusiastic, Mr. Potter. Unfortunately, not today. As I already stated, we have several things to discuss. Tell me why you are here."

"Er... for detention?"

"That is obvious. I meant the reason you received detention."

Harry sighed. So he was going to get a lecture about the book after all. He hadn't expected it from Snape though. "For reading a dark arts book."

"Correct, and you will address me as sir or professor at all times, am I understood? I will not tolerate disrespect."

"Yes, sir."

“Good. Now, we will discuss the book you bought. Is there a particular reason why you bought that book? It is a particularly dangerous book.”

“No sir. I didn’t really have much time, so I just grabbed the first book that caught my eye.”

“I see. Very well.” Snape paused as if unsure how to continue. “You only had it a few days. Did you read it?”

-

“I read a little bit, sir. I didn’t really have much time though.” This was a small lie. He had spent as much time as possible reading the book, and had copied a fair few spells down. He had hardly made a dent in the book, however.

“Hm. And how did you feel about what you read?” Snape fixed him with a piercing glare.

“What do mean, sir?”

“I mean, what did you feel about the contents of the book? Did you find it interesting? Disturbing?”

“A little of both, I suppose. Some of the spells didn’t seem like dark magic at all, but others were quite horrible.”

Snape gave a small nod and leaned back before asking another question. “Did you practice any of the magic?”

Harry considered lying, but thought Snape would probably know if he did. “Yes, sir. I practiced a few spells. They weren’t too hard.”

Snape frowned before smoothing his face back into an expressionless mask. Obviously that had not been the answer he wanted to hear. Harry rushed to reassure him. “I didn’t try any really bad ones or anything. Just a few of the more harmless ones. I don’t know why some of them were even in that book.”

“Can you tell me how you felt, when you cast the spells?”

Harry thought back. It was easy to remember the rush of power and exhilaration. He didn't really want to tell Snape, but thought Snape probably knew exactly how it felt to perform dark magic. “It made me feel happy. Really, really happy. I wanted to laugh, for no reason at all. It was a rush. And I felt powerful, like I could do anything.”

“Ah, and now we come to the reason for this discussion, Mr. Potter - the danger of practising dark magic. It is seductive, and so easy to fall into the trap of believing that it's not really so bad as you once thought. The more you practice it, the faster you fall and the harder it is to stop. Eventually the feeling of being invincible becomes a lust for power, and your thoughts will be consumed by the darkest of thoughts. For that is the nature of dark magic. No one is immune to it, and this is why you must not entertain the idea of defeating the Dark Lord in this way. It will only destroy you.”

“Well how else am I supposed to do it? No one ever tells me anything and I am always left to figure things out for myself.”

Snape sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Potter, you must understand. You are not alone in this fight. There are a number of people you have no idea about who are fighting the Dark Lord. You are not alone, and when the time comes for you to train and learn, we will all be there to assist you.”

“When, though? Voldemort is killing people everyday, and getting stronger everyday, yet everyone who knows anything refuses to tell me and no one is trying to teach me anything that might be even remotely useful.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “No one, Mr. Potter? Why do you think you are here now?”

-

“Er... detention?”

“No, Mr. Potter, you are here to learn occlumency. The first step in defending yourself against the Dark Lord is to protect your mind. I’m sure you realise the need for this.”

Harry slumped in his seat. When he thought about it, Snape had always been the one to help him, even if the man did hate him. He’d saved Harry’s life on more than one occasion, and last year he’d put a lot of time and effort into teaching Harry occlumency. “Yes, sir I do. I promise this time I’m really going to try. I mean, I tried last time, but not as hard as I should have, and I forgot to practice a lot too.”

“I am glad to hear it. Now, you will promise me you will not go in search of any more books on dark magic. If you do, the consequences will not be pleasant, I assure you.”

Harry nodded. “Yes sir.” Snape surveyed Harry before standing and motioning for Harry to do the same.

“One thing sir. How long have you known about the prophecy?”

“For quite some time now. I cannot believe the headmaster shared it with you.”

“I deserve to know. It is my life.”

“What you deserve, Potter, is a chance to have a life. A chance to be a child. You have experienced more suffering in your short life than many will ever know, and it was unfair of the headmaster to burden you with the prophecy at so young an age. Now, we will begin as we did last year. I will say the spell, and you will attempt to throw me from your mind using any means possible, though without a wand would be preferable.”

Harry blinked at the sudden change of subject. He couldn’t believe Snape had said those things. It almost sounded like he cared! Harry focussed his mind as best he could, and prepared himself for the onslaught of memories.

oOo

Harry left the dungeons in a foul mood. The civility with which the lesson had begun had quickly deteriorated when Harry failed again and again to block the attacks. Snape became increasingly frustrated and the old insults soon returned. After an hour Snape threw Harry from his office and told him not to come back on Monday night unless he had practiced clearing his mind. Harry stormed back up to the common room, relishing the thought of peace and quiet. He was sadly mistaken that he would receive any, however, when he was bombarded by Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Seamus and Dean. Ron and Hermione wanted to know how his detention had gone and Seamus and Dean wanted to ask about Quidditch. Pressing his hands to his temples to alleviate his throbbing headache, Harry turned and stormed left the common room.

He needed somewhere he could go to think! Or not think. He just needed quiet, somewhere no one would talk to him. The answer came to him as he passed a girl's bathroom. Of course! It was the one place in the school no one else would possibly be able to find him. Harry turned and ran, heading for Moaning Myrtle's bathroom and the Chamber of Secrets.

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oOo

The chamber was exactly as Harry remembered it, and this disturbed Harry slightly. It had been over three years, but the Basilisk looked as if it had been slain mere hours ago. ("Will I beee that big Harryyy?" Salazar had hissed, making Harry laugh and smile fondly.) The rusty tang of blood scented the air and Harry walked over to the spot he had lay dying. A puddle of his own blood was a glistening wet stain the brown stone and Harry turned away, walking towards the huge statue of Salazar Slytherin that sat at one end of the Chamber.

Suddenly Harry's mind kicked into gear. What if there was more than this? After all, surely if Slytherin had bothered to make this secret chamber he would have made more. It was the Chamber of Secrets after all. Harry began searching, looking for anything that resembled a door. After a relatively short period of time, Harry grinned when he found a discrepancy in the symmetry of the chamber. On the other



side of the statue, this part of wall had had a torch of gold. This wall had the same, but the torch had a small engraving similar to the one etched on the sign in the bathroom.

"Open," hissed Harry, and was rewarded with the scraping of stone as the stone slid away to reveal a dark passageway. Harry immediately entered it, and heard the stone slide shut behind him. Lighting his wand, Harry hurried forward. The passage way was quite short and after only a minute he saw light around a corner. He spelled Nox and the passage way darkened only a little. What he saw when he exited the passage way caused his breath to stick in his chest.

"Wow..."he breathed. The sight before him was amazing. He stood on a wooden walkway about 5 feet wide. The rich timber was dust free, and beautifully polished. The walkway ran the entire way around the large circular room and was lined by a railing of black wrought iron. The smooth stone walls were engraved with snakes and words of wisdom. They towered high above him and he looked up to see a rounded ceiling. The ceiling was amazing, with a scene painted on it that Harry recognised easily.

It was the exact image he had seen from the boats as they crossed the lake in first year, the first time Harry had ever laid eyes on Hogwarts. Tearing his eyes away from the walls, Harry looked down and marvelled at what lay below. A few metres to his left, the walkway curved out briefly, and a break in the railing opened up to reveal wooden steps curling down forty metres to a vast room. The steps were made of the same polished oak the walkway was, but seemed to be floating, and Harry hesitated before stepping onto the first one. Satisfied that it was safely held by magic, he held the railing and descended to the ground floor. The stairs ended and he looked forward. The stairs had curved away from the room, and Harry now stood a few metres from the back wall, directly beneath where the stairs had started.

Unlike the upper level, this room was not circular. Rather, it was oval, and he currently faced one long side of the oval. Forty metres in front of him huge emerald curtains hung from just below the level of the walkway to the floor, stretching about sixty metres along the middle of the far wall. Lining a fair portion of the walls were

bookshelves, and Harry vaguely wondered how he would reach the higher books. The shelves stretched nearly the full forty metres up to the walkway, and were separated by vast paintings, some were landscapes, others portraits, others of wild beasts that Harry had never seen before. He recognised a basilisk and a mighty dragon, but others were a mystery.

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Turning in a slow circle, Harry noted several doors on the side opposite the curtain. In the middle of the room, a comfortable lounge (emerald green) faced the curtains. Alongside the lounge were two armchairs and a low table sat in front. At the left end of the chamber, a large fireplace lay dormant, surrounded by a beautiful silver frame. Four armchairs surrounded the fireplace. The whole chamber was richly decorated in silver and emerald green, with the odd splash of black or gold.

Behind him, four huge portraits hung on the walls. Unlike normal wizarding paintings, these ones did not move, but were still, gazing down upon the chamber. On one side of the staircase, the portraits were of two women. One was an elegant, aristocratic woman in a long blue dress. She had a knowing glint in her eye and Harry thought that she exuded wisdom and knowledge. Sapphires lined the frame of her portrait. The woman in the other frame, this one studded with topaz, was shorter and rounder, and her gentle, cheerful smile reminded him of Neville. Her curly blonde locks fell to her shoulders and her face was round and pink. She wore a pale yellow lace dress and sat upon a black lounge that looked similar to one by the fireplace. On the other side of the staircase were the portraits of two men. The first was in a frame studded with rubies, and his mane of golden brown hair and bushy eyebrows reminded Harry of a lion. The man stared down proudly, and his robes were burgundy. The last portrait was of a thinner, paler man with no facial hair. He was aristocratic and handsome, his hair was the deepest black and fell just past his shoulders. The colour of his eyes matched, and Harry was strongly reminded of his Potions professor. The man also stared proudly down at the chamber, though his smile was barely there. The ends of his lips were barely turned up, but Harry could tell the man was at peace, supremely pleased with the scene before him and the

company he kept. Harry realised in a rush that these were the four founders of Hogwarts. Rowena Ravenclaw, Helga Hufflepuff, Godric Gryffindor, and Salazar Slytherin.

This chamber, he realised, was a tribute to the founders, and to Hogwarts. It was then that he noticed on the wall opposite the fireplace, a group portrait. The four friends stood in front of the castle, arms around each other and smiling happily at one another. He realised that this portrait was moving, and the four were looking at him, but they did not speak. Slytherin must have built the chamber before he fell out with the other founders.

Harry walked forward. Beneath each portrait there was an object. He walked to the one in front of Ravenclaw. Floating in mid-air was a stone bowl, and at first Harry thought it was empty. When he nudged the bowl however, it didn't move exactly, but shuddered and little shockwaves revealed that the bowl was filled to the brim with a clear liquid, which Harry thought might be water. Given how hard he had hit it, the water should have spilled, but it splashed as though it had hit an invisible barrier and fell back into the bowl. It was made of black, heavy stone that was polished until it shone. It seemed to absorb the light around it. Etched into the stone were runes that glowed with a silver-blue light when Harry nudged the bowl, but then faded away.

Harry moved on to the next. What had Hufflepuff left? Upon the humble wooden table sat a scroll. Harry unrolled it and read;

Dear Sal,

Know that you will forever have my friendship. I am here for you always, and I give you this chain as a symbol of my loyalty. Should you need me, hold the chain and call to me, and I shall hear.

Yours with love, Helga

-

Walking to Gryffindor's portrait, Harry pondered on what had happened to the chain Hufflepuff had given. Perhaps Slytherin had taken it with him when he left the castle? On the wall beneath

Gryffindor's portrait was a wooden plaque, tall and thin. It was sturdy and looked heavy, and near the top two pegs stuck out of the wood. Harry knew instantly what had hung here – the sword of Gryffindor. He scowled at the thought that it now hung in Dumbledore's office. It wasn't Gryffindor's at all. Well, it obviously had been once, but he had gifted it to Slytherin. There was no note here. Apparently Godric wasn't the sentimental type. Moving on, Harry came to Slytherin's portrait. He came across a small, beautifully decorated box sitting on an ornate silver mantle. Opening the lid, he found a pendant that hung on a shining silver chain. "Look at thissss, Salazzzar. Isn't it beautiful?" And it was indeed. The pendant itself was silver, and despite its obvious age, in perfect condition. It was shaped as a snake (of course, thought Harry, what else?) which was currently moving slowly in a loose figure of eight pattern, and curling around a circular frame. The eyes of the snake were glowing green emeralds that held Harry's own for a long while. The pendant seemed to shine, as if it were a light source. When he turned it in the light, the scales of the snake flashed. If not for the colour and cool feel of the metal, Harry might have thought the snake alive. It was a wicked piece of magic.

Tearing his eyes away from it, he hung it around his neck and tucked it beneath his robes. Turning back toward the curtains, Harry walked over to a long table that sat just to the right and forward a bit of the bottom of the stairs. On one end sat several cauldrons, of various sizes and materials. He was interested to find that a potion sat wetly in one, and chopped ingredients sat next to it. Harry frowned. Like everything else, they were still fresh. Slytherin must have placed charms on the place, thought Harry.

Walking once around the entire table, even though he could see there was nothing else on it, he walked over and sat down on the lounge. It was extremely comfortable, and had Harry not been so excited with his find, he could easily have fallen asleep.

Looking up at the curtains, Harry pointed his wand. They must open with magic, they were far too heavy to do manually. Going with what had worked so far, Harry drew his arm in a wide arc and hissed, "Open." To his delight, the curtains separated in the middle and drew apart to the sides. That was not what fascinated Harry the most,

however. As the curtains parted he was rewarded with an absolutely stunning view. This side of the castle sat on a bluff, and the land dropped away beyond the window. Harry stood and raced over to the window, holding both his hands up to the glass. It was so clear that it was hard to imagine it was even there. There was no reflection at all to tell Harry there was something separating him from the outside, and he dared not touch it lest he leave a mark. He looked out at rocky cliffs, which glowed a golden red in the light of the afternoon sun. The cliffs gave way to creeping vines and far, far below, Harry thought it must have been hundreds of metres, a thousand even, a river wound through a shadowed canyon, so thin he could barely make it out. Lush trees and bushes dotted the cliff here and there and tendrils of mist were beginning to curl up from the river. Looking up, Harry saw a forest at the top of the cliffs, and above that, the sky, dotted with silver lined clouds. It was the most beautiful vista he had ever seen. He stood staring for ages, and when it finally became too dark for him to see the river, Harry reluctantly pulled away and left the chamber. He wanted to be at dinner so his friends didn't worry about him, but he planned on coming back here very soon.

Hi... is everyone liking the story so far? Leave a review and let me know...please? : )

Updating the next chapter now because not much really happened in this one...

## Quidditch and Duelling

On Sunday, Harry attended the Gryffindor Quidditch trials. He was captain this year, as Katie had turned down the job, and he was looking forward to choosing the team. A few of his housemates came down to see who got in, as did a few Quidditch enthusiasts from other houses. The Slytherins were particularly annoying, heckling and making offensive comments from the stands. They shut up however, when Harry mounted his broom for the first time and took to the air. Oohs and aahs greeted his takeoff as people admired his new broom. It was by far the best on the market at the moment. Harry was in bliss as he soared around the Quidditch pitch, faster than he had ever gone before. The broom responded to the lightest touch and flew smoothly. Grinning, Harry flew back over to the people trying out. No one else was going for seeker, and he had already decided he wanted Katie back on the team. He tried out beaters first, and in the end selected a second year names Garrison Elwood and a fourth year named Bruce Balto. He was pleasantly surprised to see Ginny try out for chaser, and was only too happy to give her a place on the team when she outperformed all but Katie. The last chaser position went to a fifth year named Shane O'Fier who had a good eye and flew like a demon. He had saved the keeper tryouts for last, hoping Ron's nerves would calm a bit. Unfortunately he had only become more nervous as time had passed. There were quite a few people trying out for keeper, and some of them were very good. Harry set up a sort of one sided game, giving each hopeful ten minutes in front of the hoops. In the end, Harry was highly impressed with how Ron had played. He had started off shakily, but the longer he was in front of the hoops the better he got, and eventually saved more quaffles than anyone else. With the team decided, Harry dismissed everyone rushed inside. He visited the kitchens on the way back up to Gryffindor tower, grabbing a quick sandwich and an apple, then putting his broom in the dormitory and grabbing Salazar, who had been sunning himself on the windowsill. Then, grabbing his invisibility cloak to avoid anyone who might try to talk to him, Harry slipped out of the common room and walked as fast as he could without actually running to the Chamber of Secrets.

oOo

The library was just as breathtaking as he remembered it, and the curtains were still open as he had left them. He descended the stairs and smiled at the vast array of books. Hermione would be in absolute heaven here. There were four separate shelves that stretched all the way up to the walkway, and they were placed one at each end of the vast window, and one each opposite these two, on the other side of the chamber. The shelves were slightly curved so they fit the shape of the room and must have held a thousand books each, at least. He walked to the one that stood at the right end of the window and picked out a book. It was a potions text, and had been written by Salazar Slytherin himself. Stamped into the leather cover beneath the title and above the author's name was a crest, and it looked vaguely familiar to Harry, though he couldn't think where he had seen it before. He supposed it must be Slytherin's, seeing as he was the one who had written the book.

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Sliding it back into its spot, Harry turned towards the window and noticed a door just beside the bookcase. He had thought earlier it was just a portrait, but now that he was closer, he could see that a handle was incorporated into the frame. The portrait itself looked very similar to the one he had seen on the door of Snape's chambers, but the man in this one did not talk. It seemed to Harry that Slytherin had been a man who appreciated a bit of silence. Harry hissed "Open," and grasped the handle, pulling the door open.

He stepped through and found himself outside of the castle. Before him was a large stone courtyard with a tall oak tree in the middle. Beneath the shady oak was a stone bench that looked out over the canyon. The view from here was equally as good as from the window, and Harry walked closer to the edge. He stopped about a half a metre back and leaned forward slightly to look down. There was no fence and he was not game to get too close.

Feeling suddenly shaky, he stepped back quickly and went to sit on the stone bench. Next to the bench was a bird bath and a little bowl for seeds, but both had long been empty. Next time he was here, Harry decided, he would find a bathroom to fill up the bath, and maybe he could bring some bread from lunch for the other bowl. It

was windy on this side of the castle, and now that he was outside he could hear the wind whistling through the canyon. It was an eerie, unearthly sound, like the howling of lost spirits, and in the utter silence his solitude bought, it unnerved him a little.

This side of the castle seemed permanently cast in shadow, the light was dim somehow, even though the sky was clear and it was only mid afternoon. Feeling a little chilly, Harry turned and walked back to the chamber. Fear clutched at his heart as he realised the door had closed behind him and he could see no sign of it from the outside. Instead, there were more of those infernal runes that he had seen so much of lately. He started to panic, hissing at the door to open, but nothing happened. He forced himself to calm down and looked around him.

The courtyard was surrounded on two sides by the castle, and the stone floor curved outwards in a rough half circle to form the courtyard. Walking quickly and tripping on tufts of grass that stuck up through the smooth stones, Harry traced the walls of the castle, but found nothing – no engravings, no runes or words etched into the rough stone. He had no idea what was even behind this wall, certainly not the library as that was behind him.

Trying not to panic, he walked over on shaky legs and sat on the bench, leaning his elbows on his knees and cradling his head in his hands. He was such an idiot! How could he have let himself become trapped out here? He should never have come to the chamber alone, it had been a completely ridiculous idea. He continued to berate himself for several minutes before leaning back against the stone frustrated. He took deep calming breaths and tried to think rationally. He looked up, but it was a long way to the battlements. No one would hear him if he yelled, especially not with this wind. He was trapped, trapped by solid rock and empty space.

oOo

It was about four in the afternoon when Harry jumped to his feet with a victorious yell. “Of coursse, Salazzzar! Why didn’t I think of it sssooner? I am so densssse!” He was giddy with relief, and laughed at his own thoughtlessness. Pulling his wand from his sleeve, he held



it out in front of him and yelled, choking back a laugh, "Accio Dragonfire!" He danced a little jig and jogged around the bench -

until he saw his broom flying through the air. Once it reached him, he grabbed it and jumped on immediately, flying over the edge of the bluff. He looked down and gasped. He had never been up this high before, and he sat for a minute admiring the view. The wind buffeted him slightly, and seized with a sudden compulsion, he turned the broom down and into a steep diving, getting faster and faster. He whooped as the air whipped his hair around and the river below got wider and wider. He was going so fast, and after a full minute of flying direction vertical, he pulled up just a few metres above the roaring river. He let out a yell of exhilaration, but his voice was lost in the roaring wind and thundering rapids. It was dark down here. The canyon walls were so high that the sun didn't shine down here, and the air was frigid at this time of day. Water sprayed through the air and coated him lightly.

He spun his broom around to face downstream and in the direction of the castle, now a thousand metres above him. The river was swallowed by the cliff, a gaping abyss of blackness set in grey rock. Harry turned and swooped through the air, performing a few lazy loops as he headed upstream. After a minute he came to a section of river that flowed slow and smooth, and veered off towards the bank. It got shallower and the water was so crystal clear that he could see the sandy bottom. Starting to shiver, Harry cast a wistful glance at the inviting water and headed back to the castle.

oOo

Harry clambered through the portrait hole and was accosted by Ron, who slapped him on the back. "You been out flying all this time. Pretty keen, eh? I reckon we've got a pretty good team this year. No way are we gonna lose the cup, 'specially not with that broom, mate!" Ron was thoroughly excited, and Harry talked Quidditch with him for a good twenty minutes before Ron noticed his shivering and sent him to have a shower. Harry hastily acceded, promising Ron they would continue their talk over dinner. As Quidditch captain, Harry was allowed to use the prefect's bathroom, which he had not been in since the Tri-Wizard Tournament in fourth year. He sighed as he

slipped into the scalding hot water and soaked for a good hour, arriving back at the common room just when Ron and Hermione were getting ready to go down to dinner. They waited while he put his things away before they all walked down to dinner, engaged in animated conversation.

oOo

Harry slept badly on Sunday night, waking up screaming early on Monday morning. He was actually looking forward to his next Occlumency lesson, and had practiced diligently at clearing his mind before bed the last two nights. He was due in Snape's office at eight that night, and was determined to show some improvement. Rising early, he dressed and went down to breakfast alone, taking a seat at the empty Gryffindor table and propping the little green book he had bought in Knockturn Alley against a jug of pumpkin juice. He normally wouldn't read it out in the open, but the hall was practically empty and there were no teachers present. He doubted this book was worthy of being confiscated however, as it hardly seemed dark. None of the spells were particularly gruesome or disturbing, though a few were a bit scary. He didn't get a rush of power every time he practiced them either, and he took this to mean it wasn't dark. Just to be on the safe side however, he put the book away when his housemates started to arrive and began to serve himself some food. After breakfast, he and all the housemates in his year left for defence. When Snape had taken on the title of defence professor, he had requested only students with an Outstanding join his class. Harry was quite proud to note however, that every single member of the DA had achieved an outstanding, and -

the class was the biggest one he had. No one was ever really game to sit in the front row, so Harry, Ron and Hermione sat together in the middle of the second row. Soon, the rest of the class had filed in and Professor Snape entered at precisely 8:30 to begin the class, wasting no time on pleasantries. "Today we will be having a practical lesson-" He scowled while the class exchanged excited looks and whispers. "This will be a weekly activity, and every Monday from now on we will meet down near the Black Lake. I expect you all to be on time. Friday morning lessons will be of a theoretical nature still. Let's go."

Everyone scrambled to shove their books back into their bags and follow Snape from the classroom.

Once everyone was gathered down at the lake Snape addressed them again. "We will be having a bit of a competition to day, as a way for me to gauge people's abilities. I have no doubt that some will be better than others." Here he stopped to sneer at the Gryffindors before continuing. "You may use any curses and hexes you have learned in classes, bar the Unforgivables, or any others of a non-harmful nature that you know from elsewhere. I will now pair you up with a partner from another house, and everyone will observe while others duel. We will then discuss the mistakes made by the loser, and what tactics the winner used." Snape stalked between the gathered students, pairing them off. Harry ended up with Blaise Zabini, who he had heard was not a bad duellist. Hermione and Crabbe were first up, and Hermione dispatched the Slytherin in a matter of seconds. The Gryffindors applauded and Snape scowled. They moved on to the next pair quickly, as there was nothing much to discuss about such a short duel, except that speed was an advantage. By the time Harry and Blaise's turn came, the score (everyone was quietly keeping count) was just in favour to Slytherin. None of them had been in the DA, but Harry had to admit they were good.

"Potter, Zabini." Snape called when discussion of Draco and Seamus's duel was done. Malfoy had won hands down. Harry had thought Seamus was good, but Malfoy was exceedingly fast and accurate.

Harry took his place opposite Blaise in front of the class and Snape said, "Begin." Now was the perfect time for Harry to practice some of the spells he had learned in the green book. Zabini struck first and Harry put up a shield charm.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

"Protego!"

They flung a few harmless jinxes and charms back and forth, mostly dodging, but occasionally putting up a shield.

“Furnunculus!” shouted Zabini.

Harry leaped sideways, shouting, “Rictusempra!”

“Tarantallegra!”

“Densaugeo!”

Some of their spells had gone astray, and the class had retreated to a safer distance. ‘Time for some he hasn’t seen before,’ thought Harry.

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Taking aim, Harry shouted, “Calcoolius superner!” Pebbles and rocks appeared above Zabini and fell upon his head. Ducking away, he threw a curse which Harry countered. He threw another spell from the book; “Glacius ventos!” An ice wind swept around Zabini, leaving him shivering. He had begun to sweat from the exertion of the duel and bits of ice now clung to his forehead and frozen drops hung in his hair. He ducked behind a tree and cast a warming charm on himself before throwing a curse that Harry had never heard of. Harry had no time to move. He shouted “Desinuos,” a shield charm, and hoped it was effective against the curse. He was rewarded when the curse hit the shield and dispersed. Harry was beginning to tire of this game, and decided to end it.

Taking aim at Zabini he called “Conspicuae timoros!”

Zabini stopped, his hands momentarily dropping to his side, a look of fear upon his face. Harry used the advantage and cast Expelliarmus, catching Zabini’s wand in his hand.

He grinned as the Gryffindors cheered and he walked over to the group, earning a slap on the back from several of his friends. He received a sneer from Snape. Snape called for quiet so the discussion could begin and Harry looked around for Zabini so he could hand the wand back. His eyes widened when he saw Zabini standing, white as a sheet apart from the group. His hands were shaking. Snape had seen him too. “What is wrong with you, Zabini?”

Blaise gulped and looked at Snape. "N-nothing, sir. Nothing at- at all." Harry moved closer and held out Zabini's wand to him. Blaise looked at the wand and his eyes darted back up to Harry's before his arm shot out and he snatched the wand back, moving away quickly to stand with the other Slytherins. Harry raised his eyebrows at Zabini's odd behaviour. "If we could continue with the discussion..." snapped Snape impatiently. "Can anyone tell me why Potter was successful?" None of the Slytherins seemed to want to admit a Gryffindor had won, so Snape was forced to pick a Gryffindor. "Miss Brown?"

"He dodged the curses well? And he cast his own quickly?"

Snape inclined his head. "He did do those things, but so did Mr. Zabini. I am looking for something that Potter did and his opponent did not."

This time Malfoy raised his hand, along with Hermione. "Mr. Malfoy?"

"He whispered the spells. Blaise couldn't hear them, so he didn't know what he was blocking?"

Harry frowned. He thought he had shouted his curses. He usually did. He shrugged. All the better if he hadn't.

Snape nodded. "Yes, that is correct. Ten points to Slytherin. There are some curses that require a specific shield, rather than a general one. If you do not hear what your opponent has said, you may put up an inappropriate shield. The only other alternative is to dodge the curses, which, while an effective technique, can be more time consuming and distracting to your own balance and concentration than erecting a shield. Accomplished wizards can cast wordlessly, like so." Snape cast a spell at a tree without saying a word. "This is a great advantage in combat, as it saves time, and as we have already discussed, does not let your opponent know exactly what spell you are casting. Whispering," here he glanced disdainfully at Harry as if he were a slug, "is better than yelling, and I -

would encourage you all to practice casting like that. It is the first step in learning to cast wordlessly. By the end of the term I expect at least

a few of you to have accomplished casting wordless spells. The more you practice, the easier it will come to you.”

“Sir?”

“Yes, Mr. Finnigan?”

“I’d like to know what spells Harry cast at the end there. I’ve never seen those ones before. That one that freaked Zabini out was awesome.”

They had discussed a few spells that people had never seen before. Mostly it was Gryffindors asking about spells cast by the Slytherins and Snape would have the caster give a description and the incantation for the spell so the class could write it down.

Snape turned to Harry. “Yes, they were quite interesting.” He frowned. “I myself have never seen that particular shield before. Where did you learn those spells, Mr. Potter?”

“Oh, just from a book I read.”

“I see. What was the one that produced the cold wind. It was not a cooling charm; that does not involve a wind, though the effects were similar.”

“Er, that one was called the Glacial Wind charm. Like you said, it’s similar to a strong cooling charm. The incantation is ‘Glacius ventos.’”

Snape’s face drained of what little colour it held and he blinked twice. “What did you say Mr. Potter?” he whispered, his voice deadly quiet.

“Glacius ventos.” It’s pretty much the Latin translation of ‘Glacial Wind’.

There was silence around the class. Harry frowned and looked around, turning to Ron and Hermione. “What’s wrong? ...Guys?” he persisted when they didn’t answer.

Snape cleared his throat and Harry looked back to him with a quizzical expression. What was everybody's problem? Some of the Slytherin's spells had been far worse than that. Snape spoke. "Class is dismissed. Potter, come with me. NOW!" He turned and strode away, and Harry jogged to catch up. Snape stopped a few yards away from the class and turned to Harry. "What's wrong sir? There's nothing wrong with that spell. I mean, it's hardly different to a cooling charm like even you said. " Snape held up a hand to stall him. "Where did you learn that spell, Potter?"

Harry scowled. "I told you, I read it in a book."

"What book?"

"It doesn't have a title. It's just a book with a bunch of spells and potions in it."

"I take it this was not a book you found in the school library?"

"Er... no. I uh got it when I bought that other book." Harry admitted, blushing slightly and breaking away from Snape's incriminating gaze.

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Snape looked like he was about to yell, but instead pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "We are going back up to the castle and you are going to go and get the book and bring it to me."

"Why? It's an alright book. There's nothing wrong with those spells I used. They're perfectly harmless!"

"Tell me what other spells you used from that book."

Harry obeyed. He still couldn't understand what the big deal was. "Um, there was 'Calcoolius superner,' 'Desinuos,' and 'Conspicae timorous.' The first one was the one with the stones, the second one was the shield charm and-" Again Snape held up a hand to stop him.

"I do not need to know, Potter. I want the book, and you will get it for me."

Harry huffed and went to pick up his bag. He then rejoined Snape and they walked back up to the castle. "You can't confiscate another book, Professor. That last one cost me good money. So did this one."

"Do not presume to tell me what I can and can't do Mr. Potter. I confiscated the other book because it was a book on the dark arts. If I decide this one is as well, it too will be gone."

"Well it's not. I've tried plenty of the spells, and I don't get that powerful rush when I cast these ones. It feels the same as normal magic. Can you tell please me what's wrong, sir? I really don't see what the big deal is. "

Snape gazed at Harry appraisingly before replying, and his answer caught Harry off-guard. "You were incanting in Parseltongue."

oOo

By the time Harry and Snape reached the Gryffindor common room, they were both deep in thought. Harry could not understand why he had been using Parseltongue. Perhaps it had been because Salazar was curled around his arm? That didn't explain why had only been incanting in Parseltongue, and not talking like that the whole time. Snape told the password to the Fat Lady and Harry followed him in. The room hushed when the students saw the Slytherin but Snape ignored the reaction. "Hurry up, Potter."

Harry obeyed, walking quickly up the staircase to the boys dormitory. All his housemates who had attended the lesson were crowded into the room. Ron shouted when he saw Harry. "Harry! What happened? What's Snape gonna do to you? Why were you talking like... that?"

"Er... I don't really know Ron. I didn't realise I was." He blushed under the scrutiny of his friends. "Snape just wants me to get the book I learnt the spells from." He dug through his clothes and found where he had stashed the book at the bottom of the trunk and hurried from the room. He heard his friends break out in whispers as soon as he closed the door behind him and scowled. Snape was still waiting over by the portrait hole, glaring at the red decoration of the common room.



The younger students were keeping a wary eye on him, and a healthy radius between them. Harry went down to meet him and Snape indicated that he follow him.

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Harry did so, and Snape took them to an empty corridor. "Well?"

Harry held out the book and Snape took it.

Snape looked at the book with interest, running his hand lightly over the cover. "Snake skin," he murmured.

"Oh, I thought it was dragon skin, sir."

Snape ignored him and turned the book to look at the spine, his eyes widening at the sight of the crest.

"The crest of Salazar Slytherin. It must have been he who wrote this."

Harry's interest perked. He knew he had seen the crest before! "Really? It must be pretty old then."

"Indeed." Snape opened the book, treating it like a fragile object that would break at any second. He frowned however, and began leafing through page after page. He looked up at Harry, the frown still distorting his face. "You can read this?"

"Er, yeah. It's in English."

"Actually it isn't, Mr. Potter. I myself cannot read a single word of this book. It is a language I have never seen before. I had heard tell of such a script, but... to actually see it..." Snape drifted off, gazing at the book in wonder.

"Then why-" Suddenly it dawned on Harry. "It's in Parseltongue! That's why I incanted in Parseltongue, because that's how I learned them!"

"I believe so, yes."

“Are you going to take it away from me? It isn’t dark arts.”

Snape tore his attention away from the book and cast an almost amused glance at Harry. “Most people would beg to differ, Mr. Potter.”

“It isn’t evil!” Harry sagged in defeat and cast a forlorn look at the book. He should have lied, but knew that wouldn’t work with Snape.

Snape smirked. “Don’t look quite so put out, Potter. I will talk to the headmaster. If he decides the book is not unsuitable, it will be returned to you. We both know the headmaster lives to indulge your every wish, so there is a high chance you will get it back, especially if, as you claim, this is not dark arts. I would suggest, however, that until you learn to incant wordlessly, you steer clear of curses found in this book, lest you receive an undesired reaction from your peers.”

Harry huffed. “I don’t care what they think. Everyone already knows I speak Parseltongue, they should be used to the fact by now.”

“It is up to you, of course. But I will remind you, not everyone knows. I will see you tonight for your lesson.” Snape turned and strode down the dark corridor, his dark robes floating behind him, and Harry’s book clutched in his hand.

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oOo

The rest of the day dragged on slowly for Harry. He explained to Ron and Hermione about the book, and Hermione had seemed quite interested in the fact that Parseltongue had a written language. “It is a bit odd, don’t you think. Snakes don’t have hands to write with, so why would there even be a written language. I suppose it was probably invented by a wizard or witch who could speak Parseltongue. Maybe they didn’t even realise how they were writing, just like how you didn’t know you were reading or speaking it...”

"Yeah, could be. It was written by Slytherin, but whether or not he knew he was writing in Parseltongue I don't know."

"Slytherin? Wow. It must be worth a fortune!" Lucky it's gone though, mate. If it was written by him it was probably a bit off. Not that all Parseltongues are evil! That's not what I mean, but the man was a bit dodgy." Ron rushed to reassure Harry.

Hermione was thinking. "Hm. I know for a fact Slytherin left several works that were written in either Latin or English, so that would suggest he did know it was Parseltongue."

"Yeah, but maybe he needed a snake to write in Parseltongue, like how Harry needs to actually see a snake to speak it," interjected Ron.

"But Harry spoke in Parseltongue today, without a snake."

Harry reddened slightly; he could feel Salazar's smooth scales sliding slowly around his arm. "I think I spoke in Parseltongue today because that's how I learned the spell, you know? I didn't know how else to say it. I mean, I know how I would say it in English, but because I think I'm already talking in English, I can't translate it."

"That does make sense," mused Hermione.

oOo

Harry had never looked more forward to Occlumency, or to seeing Snape. At 7:30 he could wait no longer, and waved goodbye to Ron and Hermione, making his way to the dungeons. He purposely took a long route so that it took him fifteen minutes to arrive, and he had been pacing back and forth outside of Snape's office for five minutes when the door was wrenched open and he saw Snape's scowling face. "Come in, Potter."

Harry followed Snape into the room and his eyes lit upon the little book sitting on Snape's desk. "Yes! I'm getting it back? Excellent!"

Snape smirked. "Not so fast, Potter. You will get it back on three conditions. The first, if you find any dark magic in it whatsoever you are to tell either me or the headmaster at once. Understood?"

Harry didn't hesitate before agreeing.

"Secondly, you are to tell no one about this book, do I make myself clear. If the Dark Lord were to find out about this he would do anything to get his hands on it."

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"Er, well, I actually already told Ron and Hermione about it when they asked." At Snape's murderous look, Harry pushed on, "But I'll tell them there not to tell anyone, and they won't. They'll understand how important it is, and I won't tell anyone else either. I promise!"

"Very well, but if I hear that anyone else knows about it, you will never see it again."

Harry nodded vigorously.

"The third condition is my own. You will get the book back, provided I see some improvement on your last lesson."

Harry's mood soured considerably at that. "But sir, it's only been two days! How can you expect any improvement in such a short time?"

"Have you been practicing as I told you to?"

"Yes, all two of the nights I've had the chance to!"

Snape smirked. "Then surely you must have improved." He sneered at Harry. "Or perhaps not. You are as undisciplined as your father was."

Harry didn't rise to the bait. If he yelled at Snape he wouldn't get the book back ever.

"Let us begin."

Snape and Harry stood opposite one another and commenced the lesson. "Legilimens!"

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To Harry's utter dismay, the lesson degenerated as quickly as the last, and Harry's frustration grew. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't throw Snape from his mind, and the longer they practiced, the more his head began to throb. Images flashed before his eyes; Raking leaves at the Dursley's, Lying in the cupboard, a sharp pain in his side, Sirius was falling through the Veil, he was laughing as he cast the cruciatus on a young muggle woman, he screamed as the same curse was put upon him. Suddenly the images stopped and Harry lay on the floor, choking back a sob. His breathing was ragged and there were tears in his eyes. After a minute, he pulled himself together and got to his feet. Snape was staring at him. "How often have you been having these dreams, Potter?"

"A few every week. They're getting worse."

"So it would seem... In one you appeared to be the victim, but in another, you were in the mind of the Dark Lord?"

"I think I'm always in his mind. I don't see how I could be in the mind of the ones he hurts. I think sometimes I just feel the curses he inflicts because of our link, he kind of curses me too. Other times, I only feel what he feels. I don't know why there's ever a difference, though I think I've noticed that I feel the curses when I'm tired. If I'm well rested then I tend to experience more of what he's feeling. My scar always hurts afterwards, though. No matter which part I play."

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"Perhaps the reason for this is the result of the Occlumency you have learned. When you are well rested, you put up shields, but when you are tired, they are weak and so more of what he does gets through to you."

"So you're saying I'm doing Occlumency without meaning to."

"No, not in the way I am trying to teach you. Everybody has natural shields, but generally they are very weak. That is all that is happening now, your own mind is attempting to protect itself, as would anyone else's. What I am trying to teach you is to block your mind completely so that you do not experience the visions at all. We are trying to build up your natural shields, or if necessary, erect new ones."

"Oh, ok."

"I think that will be all for tonight. Take this before you go to sleep." He handed Harry a vial of Dreamless Sleep Potion. Harry nodded his thanks, pocketed the vial and headed for the door.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Mr. Potter?"

Harry turned back, a puzzled expression on his face.

"The book?" said Snape, holding it out to Harry.

"I thought you said only if I had improved, sir. I did just as badly as last week."

Snape rolled his eyes and cast Harry a condescending look. "You may not have noticed it, but there was a slight improvement, and I do mean slight." He sneered. "Last week I encountered no resistance whatsoever. This week, it was just as easy to scan your memories, but there was... something there. It was almost unnoticeable, but there all the same. Continue to practice and you shall continue to improve."

Harry hesitantly reached out and took the book. "Thankyou, sir."

Snape scowled and sat down at his desk, pulling a pile of assignments to him. He waved his hand at the door. "Be gone, Potter."

Harry rolled his eyes and left.

oOo

Hey! Next chapter will be up very soon. In two days if I get some reviews : )

## Potions Partners

First up on Tuesday morning was transfiguration, followed by potions. Harry, Hermione and Ron took their usual seats in the dungeons just as Snape stood to begin the class. "Today I will be pairing you with a partner. You will be working with this partner for the foreseeable future, on the term projects and related assignments. If, at any point I see that any groups are not working well together, I may reassign partners. Other than that, there is to be no complaints or discussion on the topic." The entire class groaned and Snape shot them all a glare. "I will call out the partners, and then you will all move to sit together. Zabini and Weasley. Granger and Abbott. Boot and Bulstrode. Crabbe and Goyle. Parkinson and Nott. Malfoy and Potter."

Harry let out a loud groan and thumped his head on the desk. He scowled at Malfoy, who, he was glad to see, had a disgusted sneer on his face and was glaring at Snape. Harry smirked, feeling slightly better. He gathered his things and got up to move over to Malfoy, who obviously had no intention whatsoever of moving.

He thumped his books down on the table and slung his bag over the back of the chair. "Potter," sneered Malfoy. "Malfoy." Harry took a seat and slumped over the desk. It was going to be a long year.

oOo

Halloween approached fast, and the Friday night feast was followed by a Hogsmeade weekend. Harry, Ron and Hermione left the castle early and made their way along the lane. It was a beautiful day, and they took their time, chatting about inconsequential things. Salazar had crawled up around Harry's neck and was peeking discretely out of Harry's collar. He was extremely excited about the trip, and kept up a string of comments the whole day. Harry found himself grinning often, and his two companions kept giving him odd looks, wondering what he was grinning about. At lunch, the three joined most of the Gryffindor Quidditch team in the Three Broomsticks, and they all talked loudly about the game. After, they went into the lolly shop, and spent half an hour picking out a wide assortment. At one point, Harry turned to ask Ron if he wanted some Fizzing Whizzbees, and he



caught sight of Hermione's hand held tightly in Ron's. 'When did that happen?' he thought. He smirked and Ron blushed slightly, swinging their hands, grinning stupidly. "About time you two got together," Harry said quietly to Ron.

Ron smiled. "I guess everyone was expecting it except us, huh? You don't mind, do you Harry?" Ron looked worried. Harry clapped him on the shoulder. "Course not, mate. I'm happy for you. You two deserve each other." Ron smiled gratefully, looking relieved, and the three spent the rest of the day continuing to enjoy themselves before heading back to the castle late in the afternoon.

oOo

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Harry began to spend more and more time in the chamber. Now that Ron and Hermione were dating, they could hardly keep their eyes (or their hands) off of each other, and Harry had no trouble sneaking away.

He had explored some of the doors leading off of the chamber. There was a huge room that looked like it had a duelling platform, and a smaller one that Harry found worked much like the Room of Requirement. Yet another door turned out to be a tunnel that slanted gradually upwards, eventually coming to a cold stone stairwell that curled tightly upwards. He stared with curiosity up the stairwell, but he had no idea how far it went, so he turned back, deciding to go further another time. There were more interesting things than the damp stone walls back in the chamber. He also found a large bathroom, which included a bath as large as the one in the prefects' bathroom. He found a small room that held a large glass tank filled with dirt, a few rocks, and some dead branches. There was a small pool of water and a flat hot rock. It was obviously meant for keeping a snake in. Harry grabbed one of the larger forked branches from the tank and took it out to the library. He used a sticking charm so that it stuck up straight from the middle of the low table in front of the lounges and Salazar loved it.

With no distractions, Harry found that he was getting more homework done than he ever had before, and his marks had improved in Transfiguration and Charms. Potions, however, was still as convoluted and exasperating as he had always found it. The improvement in his other classes was partly attributable to the large range of books in the chamber. There were books on every subject Hogwarts offered, plus more. Harry had found a book on animagi and read it briefly. Thinking about the Marauders, Harry decided it was something he would like to try, and had taken the book and put in his trunk. He hadn't touched it since, but he had determined to get around to it eventually.

One day as he was leaving the chamber, he used a blasting charm to cut stairs into the tunnel leading up to the girls' bathroom. They were rough, but it would be much easier to get up and down now, and he wouldn't get slime and dirt all over his robes.

oOo

The next Saturday was the first Quidditch match of the season, Slytherin versus Ravenclaw. Harry had not had the chance to check out the other teams yet, and was keen to see how each would play. He sat with his friends in the stand and surveyed the field.

Cho Chang was still the seeker on the Ravenclaw team. Harry cringed as he remembered the disastrous affair of the previous year. Apart from one new chaser who had replaced the captain who had left, the team remain unchanged, and Harry remembered they had been quite good. The Slytherin team had changed dramatically. Malfoy, now the captain, and Montague were the only players who remained from last year's team.

It seemed that Malfoy had picked several of his friends for the team, and Harry wondered if that was the reason he had picked them, or if they were actually any good. He was surprised to see Crabbe and Goyle as Beaters, though he supposed it suited their image. He had never been able to envision the two towering, broad-chested goons floating in thin air though. He couldn't really see Malfoy picking

anyone who wouldn't help them to win, and decided that Crabbe and Goyle must actually -

have some talent. Harry noticed with interest that Malfoy had a custom made broom that must have cost a fortune.

The game turned out to be quite short. Slytherin scored first, but Ravenclaw soon followed with two of their own. After just five minutes, Slytherin scored again and the scores were even. Harry's eyes followed the seekers as they circled slowly above the rest of the players, both looking intently for the snitch. Harry's eyes snapped back to the game as cheers rang out from the Ravenclaw section of the stands. Ravenclaw now led 30-20. Harry's eyes went back to scanning the arena for the snitch, but Malfoy saw it first. It had appeared near the bottom of the goal posts on the other side of the field to Malfoy. Cho was closer, but hadn't seen it yet. Malfoy flattened himself against his broom and tore through the air, dodging two bludgers that were sent his way. Cho had no chance once she noticed the snitch; Malfoy was almost on it and there was a hushed silence as Malfoy took a hand from his broom and reached out for the snitch. The Slytherin section of the stands exploded as Malfoy pulled up, holding the snitch in the air above his head. His team converged on him and they descended to the ground, cheering and congratulating the seeker. Harry had to admit, Malfoy had definitely improved. He would never have admitted it before, but Malfoy actually had quite a bit of talent on a broom.

oOo

Harry had an Occlumency lesson that night, and even managed to put up with Snape's sarcastic comments because he knew he was improving. He could now slow Snape's passage through his mind, but still couldn't clear the thoughts away of throw Snape out, a point Snape wasted no time in ridiculing Harry for.

oOo

Everything was going quite well for Harry, potions aside, until Transfiguration the next week. He arrived with Ron and Hermione and they took seats together. When McGonagall arrived, she brought with her a box of mice and set them the task of transfiguring them into

teacups. Harry paired with Neville as he usually did in transfiguration, and they found a vacant corner of the class where they started to practice on the mouse.

Neville had a go first, with no luck, then Harry, with equal success. They glanced at each other sheepishly and looked around the room to see the progress being made by others. Over near the windows, Hermione had nearly managed it. Her china teacup still had a long tail. She was showing the correct wand movement to Ron, who was looking confused.

Next to Harry and Neville, Lavender and Parvati were not even trying; Lavender had the mouse cradled in her hands and Parvati was scratching the top of its head and cooing at it. They put it down on the desk and started feeding it crumbs of bread from Parvati's bag. Harry rolled his eyes at Neville, who grinned. Harry turned back to his own mouse and attempted the spell again. This time, the mouse changed, becoming a shiny, ceramic lump with a tail and whiskers. It was nowhere near the shape of a cup, but it was a start.

Neville signalled to Professor McGonagall who came over and tisked at Harry's effort before returning the mouse to its original form. She was repeating the incantation to the two boys when -

shrill screams made everyone jump. Harry looked over at Parvati and Lavender and his heart stopped when he saw what had made them scream.

Salazar had crawled out of Harry's pocket and now sat on the girls' desk, fangs bared and trying to get at the mouse, but holding back for fear of Lavender and Parvati. The snake hissed and the two girls screamed again, jumping back. Before Harry could think better of it, he jumped forward hissing, "Salazzzar, no! That'sss not for eating!"

Salazar drew back, tongue flicking in the air. "I'ssss sorry, massster. Mousssie smellsss sssso delicccciouss..."

Harry sighed and picked Salazar up. "It'sss not your fault, Salzzz. I shouldn't have bought you to thisss classs. We'll go looking for sssome dinner later, in the dungeonsss."

"Yesss, massster," hissed Salazar softly, crawling up Harry's arm and under the sleeve to curl around his arm. He stuck his head out of Harry's collar. Harry petted the snake and finally looked up at the shocked faces of his classmates. Their faces were white and Lavender and Parvati were crying. One of them darted forward and picked up the mouse, which was shaking on the desk.

"Er... sorry about that Lavender, Parvati. I didn't realise he was gone," said Harry, apologetic.

McGonagall broke the silence. "That snake is yours, Mr. Potter?" she said, aghast.

"Er yeah." What else was he supposed to say?

"You foolish boy! I cannot believe you would bring such a dangerous animal into this school!"

Harry flushed angrily. "Salazar isn't dangerous! He was just hungry. I should have been keeping a better eye on him, that's all."

If Harry had thought that McGonagall's lips couldn't get any thinner, he was gravely mistaken. She looked like she was about to breathe fire. "You called your snake Salazar?"

This was not what Harry had been expecting, but before he could answer McGonagall spoke again. "Never mind, that's not the point. That snake is dangerous! It is poisonous and was about to attack a student!"

"No he wasn't!" Harry was starting to yell. "He was after that stupid mouse! I told you, he's just hungry, and he. Is. Not. Dangerous!"

"How can you say that! There are rules at this school, Mr. Potter. You are allowed an owl, a cat, or a toad. No other animals, especially not poisonous snakes!"

"Bull! Heaps of people have different pets. Ron had that stupid rat! And his sister has a pygmy puff! I've seen people with loads of

different animals. Lee had a tarantula! They're poisonous, but no one said anything about that!"

"A tarantula is not going to run off and bite a student. That snake, on the other hand, is a mindless reptile! It is dangerous."

-

Harry was really yelling now. "Salazar isn't mindless and he isn't going to hurt anybody!"

"And what makes you think that, Mr. Potter?"

"Because I told him not to!"

McGonagall was about to speak when a voice spoke from the doorway. It was Dumbledore. He walked over to the transfiguration teacher looking concerned. "Minerva, I was on my way to visit Hagrid when I heard yelling. Is something the matter?" He glanced curiously at Harry who averted his eyes. Harry had a bad feeling that Dumbledore would agree wholeheartedly with McGonagall.

"Mr. Potter here apparently has a pet snake, Albus. He brought it to class today, and it very nearly bit a student."

"It did not! I told you, he was going for the mouse!" growled Harry. How many times was he going to have to repeat himself?

"I see," said Dumbledore quietly, finally catching sight of the snake's head sticking out of Harry's robe.

"What kind of snake is it, if I may ask?"

"I haven't a clue. But he isn't dangerous at all."

"It is poisonous, Albus. I saw the fangs on it. I cannot believe that Mr. Potter would endanger his friends like this."

Dumbledore turned stern eyes on Harry. "Have you been keeping the snake in your dormitory, Mr. Potter?"

Harry avoided looking at his dorm mates as he answered. "Yes."

"And taking it with you to all your classes?"

"Not all. Sometimes she stays in the dormitory or goes exploring."

The headmaster sighed. "I am afraid I have to agree with Professor McGonagall. There are strict guidelines on what pets are allowed at Hogwarts."

"Yeah, but no one follows them," interrupted Harry.

"That may be so, but I cannot risk the safety of students. Even if the snake were not poisonous, I would still insist that you give it up, Harry. I am sure you knew this would happen. I think it would be best if you came with me now and we can go down to the forest and release him there."

There was no way he was letting them take Salazar away. The little snake was the only one he could talk to. "NO!" he yelled, and ran from the classroom. He sprinted as fast as he could for Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, ignoring the startled looks of people he passed.

-

Down in the chamber, he placed Salazar on his tree branch and explained the situation to him. "Salazzzar, my friend. You have to stay down here for a while. If anyone seesss you they will take you away from meee." Harry stroked the snake's green scales and smiled sadly.

"Why, Harryyyy?"

"The otherssss don't like snakessss. They think you are bad."

"I'm sssorry Harry. I didn't stay hidden like you assked me toooo."

"It isssn't your fault, Salzzz. People jussst don't undersstand you. It will only beee for a short while, until everyone forgetsss about you."

You can go hunting while you're down here, and I'll come and sssee you all the time."

"Yesss, massster."

Harry smiled. "Good. I have to go now for classss, but I'll be back tonight."

"I might go exxxxploring..."

"That'sss alright. If I don't ssseeeee you tonight, I'll sssee you another time."

Harry made his way from the chamber and walked to the dungeons. He was the first one there, and he waited outside the classroom for Hermione. When she got there, however, she immediately launched into an angry lecture. "How could you, Harry? Keeping a poisonous snake in the dormitory. What if it bit someone? And talking to the professors like that!"

Harry cut her off by holding a hand up. "There's no need to say anymore, Hermione." He turned and walked into the classroom, and instead of sitting with Hermione and Seamus, sat down a seat away from Malfoy, who looked at him curiously. Snape would probably move them all anyway, but he had no intention of sitting with Hermione at the moment.

Snape did indeed tell them to sit with their partners, and Harry shifted over one seat, sliding his books across the table. Those who had been in transfiguration kept shooting Harry deeply unsettling looks. It didn't take long for Snape to notice and get annoyed, and he stopped mid-way through his pre-practical lecture and snapped, "What is wrong with everyone today? Half of you have been distracted the entire time I have been talking!"

When no one answered him, but looked at Harry, Snape did as well. "Potter. Something you'd like to share. Is there any particular reason the class cannot seem to stop looking at you?"



“I’m not entirely sure what’s wrong with them sir, but if you ask me I’d guess that they’re a bunch of bigoted pigs.”

“Harry!” squealed Hermione, and Harry shot her a filthy look, while Snape looked surprised.

“And what may I ask has led you to that conclusion, Mr. Potter.”

Harry snorted. “They don’t like my choice of friends.”

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Snape frowned, confused, and Malfoy spoke from beside Harry. “It turns out Professor, that Potter has been keeping a poisonous pet snake this year. It came out in class today and startled some of the students. When Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore told him he had to get rid of it, he threw a tantrum and ran out of the classroom.”

“I did not throw a tantrum, Malfoy!”

Snape frowned and turned to Harry. “You are aware that keeping a snake is not in accordance with school rules, do you not, Mr. Potter?”

“It’s been pointed out to me,” replied Harry, a little sarcastically.

“Do not take that tone with me Mr. Potter. Ten points from Gryffindor. Where is the snake now?”

“The headmaster made me get rid of it.”

Snape scrutinised him for a minute before turning and continuing his lecture. He finished shortly afterwards and set them to brewing. Twenty minutes from the end of the lesson, Harry reached the critical stage of his potion. He had two more ingredients to add. Chopped shrivelfigs needed to be added and the mix stirred constantly for four minutes. Immediately after, crushed snail shells needed to be sprinkled onto the top, or the solution would explode. Just as Harry added the shrivelfigs, a knock came at the classroom door, and Harry looked up from his stirring to see Dumbledore enter the room. Dumbledore looked around the classroom and his eyes fell upon

Harry, who turned back to his stirring, concentrating on keeping the speed constant. "Harry, my boy, I was wondering if I might have a word with you for a moment. If you could just step outside?"

"I don't think so Professor." A few gasps sounded around the classroom at his rudeness.

Dumbledore sighed. "I really must insi-"

Harry cut him off. "I'm at a rather delicate stage in the brewing at the moment sir. If I stop stirring or don't add the snail shell, the potion will become volatile." He paused for a few seconds before continuing, eyes still fixed on his potion. "Besides which, it's not really my decision. It's Professor Snape's class that you're interrupting, so I would suggest you ask him."

Snape growled at Harry's rudeness, and started to reprimand him, but Dumbledore stalled him. "No, no, Severus. He is quite right. I should have asked you of course. Please forgive my oversight. If I might borrow Harry, when he is finished his potion?"

Snape bowed his head slightly. "Of course, Headmaster."

Ten minutes later, Harry had bottled a sample of his potion and cleaned up his work bench. He stepped out of the classroom and Dumbledore followed. "Harry, I know you must be upset, but it really is not safe to keep such an animal. I must insist you accompany me to the forest and release the snake. He will be fine, I'm sure."

"It's too late sir. I've already done it, so you have nothing to worry about."

Dumbledore frowned, clearly not inclined to believe Harry. "Harry, my boy, I cannot tolerate disobedience. If it were any other student, I would be telling them exactly the same thing."

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"I would hope so, sir. But as I already said, I've taken care of it. I thought about what Professor McGonagall said, and I agree with her."

I was endangering the other students, I just hadn't thought of it that way before because Salz was always so good."

"Alright. I am glad you took the initiative, my boy." His eyes twinkled kindly and Harry forced a smile and nodded. "Thank you sir."

"How about you run along to lunch now. You're a growing boy and I'm sure you are hungry. The bell will be going any minute now, and I don't think Professor Snape will mind if you miss the last few minutes of class."

"Yes sir, thank you." Harry forced another small smile and left the dungeons, taking a seat at the Gryffindor table where a group of first years already sat giggling and piling their plates high. A few minutes later, Ron, who had had a spare, walked in, and Harry immediately got into an argument with him over the snake incident.

Ron could not believe that Harry had kept a poisonous snake in the dormitory, and Harry ended up yelling at him and storming from the Great Hall. The rest of the week passed in a blur. Harry was not talking to anyone of his friends, and he spent any time he wasn't in classes down in the chamber, even skipping Quidditch practice on Saturday.

That Saturday night, when he had been in the chamber all day, he was feeling extremely hungry, but was reluctant to go to the Great Hall. Maybe he could sneak up to the kitchens and grab something to eat there. If only it wasn't so far to walk! He watched as Salazar curled around her branch. "Salzzz, I wish there wasss a way to get to the kitchensss without going all the way around."

Suddenly, Harry felt the lounge disappear from beneath him and he fell to the hard stone floor. "Ouch! What the bloody hell!" He stood up and froze. He was no longer in the Chamber of Secrets. Instead, he was standing facing a portrait of a bowl of fruit – the entrance to the kitchens. 'How the hell did I get here?' he thought to himself. Hermione's voice echoed in his head. "You can't apparate or disapparate in Hogwarts." So he couldn't have apparated, even if he knew how. He realised he could feel a warm heat on his chest. Reaching underneath his shirt, his hand came into contact with the

metal of the pendant he had found in the chamber. He frowned. It had never been hot before, had always sat on his chest with a cold metal chill. He pulled it out and inspected it. The snake was moving faster than usual, slithering around the circle frame and its own body. Perhaps the pendant was like a portkey, one that worked within the wards of Hogwarts?

Deciding to try and return to the chamber using the pendant, Harry first tickled the pear and pulled on the handle that appeared. No matter how interesting his discovery was, he was still starving. He left the kitchens five minutes later with his pockets filled with sandwiches and fruit, and a flagon of pumpkin juice. Checking that there was nobody at either ends of the corridor, Harry slid the pendant out from under his shirt and held it in his hand. It was cool again, the snake once again slithering at a sedate pace.

He had no idea how it worked, so decided to do exactly what he had done in the chamber. 'I want to be in the Chamber of Secrets,' he thought. Suddenly, Harry was standing in the cool damp chamber, next to the basilisk. Not exactly where he had been hoping to land, but close enough. He looked at the pendant again and thought; 'Chamber library.' And he was there, right in the middle of the big -

oval room. He was extremely excited. He could go anywhere in Hogwarts, and be back in the chamber with a simple thought. The possibilities were endless – imagine the pranks he could pull with this! Laying down on the lounge, he smiled and tucked the warm pendant beneath his shirt, Salazar slithered over and curled up on top of it. Harry pulled out a sandwich and began to eat.

oOo

One Monday dawned bright and cold. It was now Early December, and the days were shorter and the temperatures had dropped. The ground was covered with a light snow. The defence class gathered around the lake and Snape paired them up as he always did. Harry had heeded Snape's advice up until now, but since the incident in transfiguration, Harry was feeling spiteful towards his classmates, and decided to go all out with the Parseltongue spells.

Today, Snape paired Harry with Hermione and Harry grinned nastily. He had not expected Hermione to be so against him having a snake. After all, she was muggleborn and knew what it was like to be judged. She however, had sided with Ron, claiming she was mad both because Harry had endangered his friends, but also because he should not be indulging in the talent. ("Just because you can, doesn't mean you should!" she had said. "It scares people.")

Harry now refused to talk to her, and most of his other housemates had sided with Ron and Hermione. Neville and Seamus had occasionally spoken to him, but only briefly and when no one else was around. When it was Harry's turn to duel, he stood opposite Hermione and gave a low bow, smirking. Hermione, following custom, bowed as well. Snape said, 'begin,' and Harry and Hermione threw a curse at the same time. Hermione cast *Rictusempra*, while Harry cast 'Calcoolius Superner'. Both spells struck their targets, and Harry cast a finite on himself while Hermione ducked away from the shower of pebbles and small rocks. Harry waited for Hermione to get right. She cast a curse that Harry dodged, and he hissed out, "*Terra concito!*"

The ground beneath Hermione trembled, and unable to keep her balance, she fell to the ground. After a few seconds, the trembling stopped, but Harry had cast again while Hermione was unbalanced. "*Emmovi voxi!*" he hissed, and this time Hermione heard him. Her eyes widened as she realised he was using Parseltongue again. Getting to her feet, she quickly looked herself over, unable to see what Harry had done. Harry smirked and assumed a relaxed stance, leaning against a tree and tossing his wand in the air. Hermione looked confused, but prepared to curse him. Harry's smirk broadened when he saw her mouth move, but no sound came out. Her eyes widened, and she flicked her wand, again and again, trying to cast a spell.

"Looks like you haven't been practicing, Hermione. I would have thought you'd have mastered wordless spells by now." Harry pushed himself off the tree and stalked closer to Hermione, who backed up, still flicking her wand uselessly. Harry could see Ron out of the corner of his eye fidgeting nervously. Deciding to end Hermione's suffering, Harry cast "*Tacta morseus.*" Hermione jumped, and dropped her wand. Her mouth opened in silent little shrieks as she started

brushing at her arms and neck and body, trying to rid herself of the feeling of being bitten. Harry accio'd her wand, and turned when he heard Ron yell, "Stop it Harry! Can't you see she's getting upset."

-

Harry glanced casually from Ron to Hermione, who was still frantically rubbing her hands all over her body.

"Really, I didn't notice. Why doesn't she say anything?"

Suddenly the spell Harry had cast earlier broke and Hermione's silent screams could be heard. Starting to feel bad, Harry ended the curse and Hermione ran over to Ron breathing heavily and trying to hold back sobs. Harry walked over to Hermione and held out her wand. "You stay away from her!" spat Ron.

Harry ignored him. "Your wand, Hermione."

Ron snatched the wand off of Harry. "How could you do that to Hermione, Harry? It was horrible!"

Harry leaned in close to Ron and spat, "She deserved it."

Ron let out a strangled yell and knocked Harry to the ground, punching Harry across the jaw. Harry managed to point his wand at Ron and hissed "Aranio!"

Suddenly Ron was covered in sticky spider web, and he let out a cry, scooting back from Harry and trying to get the web off. Harry stood and pointed his wand at Ron again, this time incanting "Arachnia!" A sizeable spider appeared in the web, and Ron went white as a ghost. He started letting out hysterical little cries, ripping the web away from his face.

"That is quite enough!" yelled Snape, stepping in and vanishing the web and spider from off of Ron. He jerked the boy up and pushed him over to where the other Gryffindors stood. Then he turned to Harry. He was absolutely livid with rage – Harry could see a tic going in his jaw. "Detention, Mr. Potter, and fifty points from Gryffindor. You will

go and sit over there where I can see you," he pointed towards the edge of the lake, "and you will not move until I come and collect you."

"Why should I have detention! Ron is the one that attacked me!"

"You were antagonising him."

"At least I didn't hit him! All I did was defend myself. He should be the one with detention, not me!"

"If and how I punish other students is none of your business, Potter. Go and sit where I told you now, or it will be another fifty points!"

Harry glared at Snape before turning and stalking off to the edge of the lake while Snape continued with the class. He felt bad for upsetting Hermione, but she had upset him first. Hardly anyone in the school was talking to him because of the transfiguration incident. Parvati and Lavender cast him looks of deepest loathing every time they crossed paths, and most other people were unnerved by the whole Parseltongue thing.

He'd gone through something similar in second year, but he wasn't going to hide or change just so people accepted him. He shouldn't have to. Harry passed the rest of the lesson skipping rocks across the surface of the Black Lake, and when Snape told him he could go, he grabbed his bag and stormed up to the castle angrily. Unwilling to face his classmates, Harry skived off charms, transfiguration and herbology and spent the rest of the day in the Chamber. He lay on the lounge, staring up at the -

mural of Hogwarts and seething. He didn't feel like studying, and as Salazar was off hunting, Harry grew bored.

It would be excellent, he thought, to have someone to talk to. A human someone, he corrected himself. Salz was good company, but a snake's understanding of all things human was somewhat limited. While the little Snake was logical and clever in its own way, he understood nothing of human emotions except what Harry had explained to him. Even then, knowing what 'sad' or 'lonely' meant was different to actually understanding. The chamber was an

amazing place and he wanted to share this experience with someone. He thought instantly of Ron and Hermione, his best friends, but even more quickly decided against it. Even if they weren't fighting, Hermione would only warn and caution him and insist he go to Dumbledore. Ron on the other hand, would probably refuse to come down here on principle, then insist he go to Dumbledore. No, Harry wanted to share this with someone who would value the chamber for what it was, someone who really appreciated the history and beauty of the place.

Next chapter update will be soon. It's the longest one so far : )



## Behind the Waterfall

Harry spent the last Hogsmeade weekend before the Christmas holidays alone. He used his cloak and walked anonymously among his classmates, feeling sad when he saw Ron and Hermione. They too looked slightly sad, but they were holding hands and smiled at each other often. Harry followed them for a while, but when they went into the Three Broomsticks Harry continued up the road. After a time, the road petered out into a rocky path that led up into the mountains. Walking from memory, Harry eventually came to the cave where he and Ron had visited Sirius in their third year. Harry sat, leaning against the wall and made a silent promise. Never again was someone he cared about going to die because he acted recklessly. An hour later Harry left the cave and climbed up on a rock where he could see all of Hogsmeade laid out before him and, in the distance, Hogwarts.

Deciding it was time to be heading back, Harry slid off the rock and a sudden thought occurred to him. You weren't supposed to be able to apparate within Hogwarts, so what if he could apparate from here, with the pendant? Pulling it out he held it in his hand and stared at the silhouette of Hogwarts. Thinking of his dormitory, Harry spoke the words. "Gryffindor boys' dormitory." He blinked, and when his eyes opened, he was no longer standing on the rocky mountain, but beside his bed. Suddenly, his vision wavered and he collapsed unconscious onto the floor.

oOo

When Harry woke, he found himself in the hospital wing. He was dressed in a white hospital robe, and he frantically stuck his hand down the neck to make sure he was still wearing the pendant. He sighed with relief as he felt the cool silver, and withdrew his hand, relaxing into the soft pillows. He heard someone coming and turned his head to see Madam Pomfrey bustling over with an assortment of potions. Depositing them on his bedside table, she handed him his glasses. "Glad to see you're awake, Mr. Potter. How are you feeling today?"

"I feel fine, a little tired. What happened? I don't remember how I got here." The last thing Harry could remember was using the pendant to get back to the dormitories, and the sudden draining of energy he had experienced.

"Your friends found you on the floor beside your bed. They couldn't wake you up and brought you here. I couldn't find anything physically wrong with you, but you appeared to be suffering from exhaustion. You've been out for over 24 hours now. If you're still tired, perhaps you should rest for a little longer before I release you."

"Er... no, that's alright thankyou, Madam Pomfrey. I really feel fine now. I guess I just over-exerted myself."

-

Harry left the hospital wing thinking deeply about what had happened. He was fairly certain he had collapsed from using the pendant, but he had never experienced those effects the other times he had used it. Perhaps it was the distance he had used it to travel. The other times, he had only travelled within the castle. If the pendant used his magic rather than its own, maybe it simply took more energy the further you wanted to travel. It made sense.

Satisfied that he had solved the problem, he resolved to use the pendant only to travel short distances, and made his way down to breakfast.

oOo

Harry had been thinking for over a week on who he could tell about the chamber. It had to be someone who didn't automatically hate all things Slytherin, which ruled out a fair chunk of people. Then it had to be someone who wouldn't go straight to a teacher, and someone he could stand to be around. As long as Harry thought about it, there didn't seem to be anyone who fit all three criteria. In the end, he decided to settle for second best.

So it was that Harry found himself, on the 14th day of December, waiting out of sight in a lonely corridor, waiting for a certain someone

to finish dinner and return to the common room. He only hoped the person came alone, or the time he'd spent waiting would be wasted. He was beginning to shiver from the damp air when the person he'd been waiting for finally walked into the corridor and started in Harry's direction. Harry waited until the boy was level with him.

"Hey, Malfoy," Harry hissed from the shadows. Malfoy spun around, his hand going to his wand. His eyes narrowed when he saw Harry.

"Potter? What in the world are you doing down here?"

"Waiting for you."

Malfoy quirked an eyebrow. "And why, may I ask is the Boy-Who-Lived lurking in the dungeons waiting for me?"

"I want to show you something."

"You want to show me something. As if I believe that, Potter. Have Granger and Weasley put you up to something? Are they waiting around the corner with dungbombs?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "You're far too suspicious, Malfoy. Surely you've noticed that we haven't been talking lately? Anyway, like I said, I just want to show you something. I think you'll like it."

"What could you possibly have that I would be interested in, Potty? Besides, I'd really rather not be seen with you."

"I thought as much. Not to worry, I came prepared." With that, Harry whipped out his invisibility cloak and threw it around his shoulders, leaving just his head visible. Then he stuck out his lower lip and turned puppy-dog eyes on Malfoy. "Please? I promise you can leave if you don't like it."

Malfoy, looking thoroughly repulsed by Harry's facial expression, but also somewhat interested, glanced up and down the damp corridor before asking, "What is it you want to show me?"

"I can't tell you yet. You have to see it for yourself. Come on, before someone comes along."

Malfoy hesitated a moment before snapping "Fine," and striding over to where Harry stood and letting Harry position the cloak over them both. "This is against my better judgement, and if you've got something planned, you're going to be sorry, Potter."

They walked slowly, keeping quiet, shoving each other occasionally when there was no one around. Eventually they made it to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom and Harry pushed the door open. Malfoy, looking highly affronted, pulled back. "I'm not going in there Potter, are you insane. That's a girl's bathroom! It's entirely improper."

Harry laughed quietly. "I promise you, it's worth it."

"What can possibly be so interesting in a girl's bathroom?" Suddenly Malfoy's eyes widened and he leaned in towards Harry. "Wait! Is this the one? The one with the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets? I'd heard rumours it was in a girl's bathroom after second year, but no one really knew if it was true or not."

"I knew you'd be interested. Come on, now, or someone will hear us. Moving more quickly now, they pushed open the door and threw the cloak off. Malfoy turned to Harry. "You've been in here before, haven't you. I mean, apart from the first time?"

"Yeah, I've started coming in here quite often. Only this year, though. I needed to get away from everyone for a while, and this was the only place I could think of to go."

"Why are you bringing me here? " Malfoy asked, suspicious again.

"It's interesting down there, but what's the point if I can't share it with somebody?"

"Why me though? Why not Granger and Weasley?"

"They'd just rat me out to McGonagall or the headmaster."

“How do you know I won’t?”

“Because I know you, unlike them, will appreciate what’s down here. Well, Hermione might too, but she’d still tell. I promise you, it’s amazing. Once you’ve seen it, you’ll want to come back.”

“I heard it was just some big stone room with a bunch of snake statues and engravings everywhere. What’s so interesting about that that you’d want to see it more than once or twice?”

“That room is interesting, but I agree it’s not worth more than a few visits. But then I was thinking, it’s the Chamber of Secrets, right? Not the Secret Chamber or something, but secrets – plural. I thought there must be more down here, other than that one room, and I was right. So let’s go.” Harry got down on his knees in front of the sink with the snake and hissed the word, “Open.” The sink slid away, revealing the roughly made stairs, and for the first time Malfoy looked sincerely interested, his eyes wide and not a trace of scorn or scepticism on his face. “Awesome.”

Harry grinned. “It gets better.”

-

They walked carefully down the steps, lighting their wands when the sink slid back behind them. Once they came into the main tunnel Draco stopped. “We won’t get lost down here, will we? You do know the way.”

“Of course, don’t worry. We’re nearly to the chamber with the basilisk anyway.”

“Wait! That monster is still there?”

“Who did you think was going to get rid of it? No one else can get down here. It’s weird though; it looks like new, like I only killed it yesterday. Even the blood is still wet. I ‘spose it’s good in a way. Imagine the smell if it had been rotting!”

“Ugh. I suppose it must be the magical properties that have kept it that way.”

“Yeah, something like that I guess, I’ve never really thought about it.” They walked in silence for a few more minutes before the tunnel opened up to reveal the chamber. Harry spread his arms wide and jumped down from the small ledge before turning to Draco and bowing. “Welcome to the Chamber of Secrets!”

Malfoy snorted condescendingly as he stepped down, but his eyes were raking over the chamber and the basilisk with undisguised interest. “So this is it,” he said softly. He walked closer to the basilisk and began to inspect it. “I can’t believe you killed this when you were only twelve.”

“That sounds suspiciously like a compliment, Malfoy.”

Malfoy responded with a glare before turning back to the gigantic snake. “Not likely Potter. Merely a statement.”

Harry let Malfoy look at the snake and room for a few minutes before dragging him away. “Come on, now for something even better.”

Malfoy reluctantly followed Harry. “You know, we should harvest the parts from that snake. Severus would die to get his hands on some of those things.”

“Severus?”

“He is my godfather, you know. Anyway, as I was saying, Basilisk Venom, any part of a basilisk really, is extremely rare. In fact, there hasn’t been a sighting of a basilisk dead or alive in over a hundred years, apart from this one. The ingredients are wickedly expensive. There are some potions I would really like to try, and Severus would have a heart attack if I gave him some venom and scales for Christmas!”

Harry snickered at the thought of Snape opening a Christmas present and squealing with delight, then again at the thought of Snape having a heart attack. “Slow down, Malfoy. You look like you’re about to wet

yourself with excitement.” Harry laughed when Malfoy scowled. “I guess this means you want to come back.”

Malfoy snorted. “As if you thought I wouldn’t.”

-

“Well anyway, I agree with you about the potions. I’ve actually been reading a book that has a whole bunch of potions that require Basilisk parts. To be quite honest though, they’re a bit above my skill level (“I don’t doubt that,” drawled Malfoy) and I have no idea how to harvest the venom. I don’t think that part would be too difficult though.”

“No,” agreed Malfoy. “You just have to be careful not to touch the venom, obviously. It’s very corrosive so it has to be kept in the right sort of vial as well, or it would just eat through it.”

By this time they had reached the hidden entryway and Harry hissed out “Open.” Again. Really, Slytherin had zero imagination. They walked through to the end of the passageway and Harry grinned when Malfoy gasped at the sight before him. “Merlin...” he breathed, “It’s beautiful.”

“Awesome, isn’t it. This is the library, as I’m sure you can tell from all the books. I haven’t explored much more than this. There’s a huge empty room through the double doors over there that I think is a duelling room. There’s a big platform in the middle. Through that smaller door over there is another empty room, but it’s a bit like the Room of Requirement. Look at this.” Harry took out his wand and pointed it at the giant curtains that reached from the vaulted ceiling to the ground floor. He drew his arm in a wide arc, drawing the curtains across to reveal the view to Draco. He glanced at Draco whose jaw had dropped at the stunning vista. “Nice, eh?”

“Nice? It’s amazing! Shite, Potter, you should have brought me here sooner!” Draco descended the stairs and crossed the room to the window, Harry following. Just as Harry had done, Draco held his hands up to the glass without touching. “You know, I think we’re somewhere below Snape’s quarters here. He has a view exactly like

this, only he's higher up, I'm almost sure of it. He actually has a window kind of like this too, though not as big."

"You've been in Snape's quarters?"

"Like I told you before, Potter. He's my godfather. I talk with him quite often."

"You can get outside, you know. Just over there is a door that leads to the outside. There's a little courtyard there. It's nice. Gotta be careful though, cos it can get windy and there's a drop of more than a thousand feet into the canyon and no fence." Draco rolled his eyes, though he glanced with interest in the direction Harry had indicated, and turned away from the windows, surveying the rest of the room.

For hours, Harry and Draco strolled around the library, and then the two smaller rooms Harry had talked about. They briefly glanced into a few corridors Harry hadn't entered yet, but decided at one in the morning that it was time to go.

"One thing, Malfoy. Give me your word on this. You're not to tell a soul about this place, alright. I mean no one. Not you father, Snape, your best friend or your girlfriend, got it? I swear, if you do, you will never see this place again."

Draco grimaced as if the thought of never seeing the Chamber again was almost too terrible to bear thinking before holding out his hand to Harry and saying "Deal." Harry shook the offered hand and scowled when Draco wiped his hand on his shirt. "Unfortunately, we're going to have to leave the way we came in. I still haven't found another way out." A minor lie, but there was no way in hell -

Draco was finding out about the pendant. "I guess we'd better get going then," replied Draco in a voice tinged with reluctance. "You know, if I could bash through the walls, it would probably only take me a minute to get back to Slytherin. Maybe one of those tunnels leads to the dungeons."

"Probably does. It makes sense. We should have a look some time."



“Yeah, after we’ve harvested parts from the basilisk, and looked around the library more.”

“Mm. Come on, let’s go. I’m tired and we’ve got classes in a few hours. I want at least a few hours of sleep tonight.”

“Yes, well, so do I. I can barely function if I don’t get enough sleep.”

“You’re such a pansy, Malfoy,” said Harry as he yawned.

“Git.”

oOo

The next Tuesday, Harry woke feeling happier than he had done in a good long while. The prospect of having someone to explore the chamber with made him smile, even if that person was someone he shared a mutual dislike with. Harry dressed and went down to breakfast, taking a seat next to Neville, who gave him a small smile. Harry ate quickly, but waited for Neville to finish and then walked up to transfiguration with him. The term was winding down, and they only had eleven days left until the Christmas break. “What are you doing for Christmas this year, Neville?”

“Oh, the usual. Going home with my Gran.” Neville pulled a face and Harry smiled.

“What about you Harry? I know you go to Ron’s some years, but er…”

“I guess I’ll just stay here. It’ll be good, a few weeks of peace and quiet, y’know.”

Neville smiled. “I guess.”

“Hey Neville, do you know what Ron and Hermione are doing?”

Neville looked away. “Yeah, I do. They’re both going to the Burrow. Ron invited Hermione just yesterday.”

“Oh, ok,” replied Harry, trying to sound cheerful.

Neville gave him a comforting smile. "Don't worry, Harry. It'll all work out. You guys can't stay mad at each other forever."

"Guess not."

They spent the lesson transfiguring plastic bags into boughs of holly to decorate the room, and Neville and Harry got a hang of the spell more quickly than usual. Harry left the class feeling quite cheerful and made his way down to potions. He was looking forward to seeing how Malfoy would treat him today. The past weeks, they had spent either ignoring each other, or else spending lessons making snide and insulting comments to each other. Harry walked in and sat down next to Malfoy, -

who gave him his customary sneer. Harry raised an eyebrow at Malfoy, and the boy narrowed his eyes. Obviously he was wondering if he could still get away with treating Harry the way he always did and still be able to go back to the chamber. Harry shrugged, in a 'you'll see' sort of way and Malfoy scowled. They spent the lesson in silence and turned out a fine potion. When the bell rang, Harry leaned over and whispered "Meet me outside the bathroom, 8:00," before slipping out of the classroom and going to lunch.

oOo

At ten to eight, Harry made his way down to the bathroom and saw Malfoy already waiting. Malfoy turned when he heard Harry's footsteps and nodded a greeting. "Ready to go?" asked Harry. Malfoy nodded again and they slipped into the bathroom. Thankfully no one was there and they went straight into the tunnel. They lit their wands and descended the steps. Nearing the bottom, Malfoy tripped and nearly fell, but he caught himself. "These steps are a bit dodgy. You'd think Slytherin would have made a better way to get in, wouldn't you. I certainly can't picture him going through a girl's bathroom every time he wanted to get there."

Harry smiled. "Actually, I made the steps, and I don't think this is the way Slytherin got in to the chamber. This used to be a disgustingly

slimy tunnel. I think its only purpose was for the basilisk to get into the main part of the castle.”

“How did Slytherin get in then? I didn’t see any other way when we were in here the other day.”

“Dunno. There’s a tunnel that leads up from the library to a stairwell. I don’t know how far it goes cos I haven’t followed it to the end, but it seems like it’s going to end up in the dungeons somewhere.”

They reached the hidden door next to the statue of Slytherin and Harry opened it.

“What is it you say to open these doors, Potter?”

Harry smirked. “Open, for all of them. Really, Slytherin was lucky so few people are Parseltongues. Security down here is awfully lacking.”

To Harry’s surprise, Malfoy actually laughed.

Entering the library, Harry walked over and flopped down on the lounge. Draco came over and stared out the window. Outside it was a clear night, and the Harry could see stars shining brightly. There was a full moon, and it sat directly overhead, highlighting the ragged cliffs. Draco turned and walked over to the lounge, glancing at the tree branch that was stuck to the table. “What’s that for?”he asked.

“Oh, I put that there for Salazar to climb on. He really likes it.”

“What happened to that snake anyway? Did you end up getting rid of it?”

Harry shot a look at Draco, saying he was crazy. “Of course not! I told Dumbledore I did, but I’ve just been keeping her down here. She must be out hunting.”

-

Harry sat staring out the window while Draco walked around the room, examining books and portraits.

Harry had an idea. "Want to go flying?"

"Flying? Are you crazy! It's dark outside."

"What, you've never been flying in the dark? There's plenty of light from the moon. I want to show you the canyon. I bet it looks amazing at night."

"The canyon? You mean down there? It's pitch black! We won't be able to see a thing. You are mad."

"Imagine how many stars we'll be able to see from down there."

"I see enough stars during astronomy."

"Yeah, but it's darker down there, so we'll be able to see the sky better. Plus, it's a clear night tonight and I bet you there's not going to be many more of them for a while."

Eventually, after much convincing from Harry, Malfoy acquiesced. Harry led him out into the courtyard, propping the portrait hole open with a chair.

"What's that for?" asked Malfoy.

"Oh, last time I came out here I let it shut behind me and I was stuck out here for hours before I thought to accio my broom. There's some runes on the wall when you close it, but I have no idea what they mean."

Malfoy snorted. "You are an idiot Potter. I can just imagine you sitting out here crying because you think you're going to die here."

"I did not cry!" replied Harry hotly, scowling at the pale Slytherin. He was seriously regretting bringing Malfoy down here two days in a row. The boy was far too cocky and sure of himself for Harry's liking, and had been flinging veiled insults and slurs at Harry all night. He sighed to himself. He could put up with it if it meant some company. Raising his wand, he summoned his broom and Malfoy did the same. They

waited in silence until the Malfoy's broom arrived within twenty seconds. "We must be really close to the Slytherin dorms here."

"No, my broom's just faster than yours."

Harry rolled his eyes. "How much did it cost you for a broom like that?"

"A fair bit. Nothing my father can't afford, however. It is a fine broom and especially suited to me."

"Only the finest for a Malfoy," said Harry sarcastically, and Malfoy turned his nose up at Harry.

"Quite."

Not a moment later, Harry's broom arrived, and the two boys mounted their brooms, hovering with their feet dangling a foot above the ground.

-

"After you, Potter. I'm not diving down into some dark canyon I've never visited before without a buffer in front of me. Just yell if you hit something, won't you?"

"There isn't anything to hit, Malfoy, except the water, and you can hear that once you get close enough."

"Lead on, then. I haven't got all night."

Harry turned his broom into a steep dive as he had done the other day and sped down into the darkness. Gradually, he began to see flecks of moonlight reflecting off of what must be the water and he slowed. Draco appeared beside him and they descended slowly until the sound of rapids was roaring in their ears. It was too loud to talk, and Harry turned his face upwards to the stars. The view was amazing. He had never seen so many stars, so bright. Even during astronomy the light of the moon dulled the stars and the light shining from the castle windows had a negative effect on stargazing. Down in

this blackness though, there was nothing to take away from the brilliance of the stars. They sat for ages, taking in the beauty of the sky. After a while Harry began to feel cold and turned to look at Draco. He could just make out the other boy who was sitting mere inches from him, his white face dimly glowing in the dark. Harry leaned over and nudged Draco, jerking his head upwards towards the castle and Draco nodded. They took a last look at the sky and then took off, flying back up to the castle. When they reached the courtyard, Draco nodded to Harry and flew higher, circling the nearest tower, which Harry assumed to be Slytherin Tower. Harry waited until he could no longer see the other boy before he turned and headed to Gryffindor Tower.

oOo

That Friday, Harry climbed to the top of the Astronomy tower for his 8:00 class. It was a fairly small class; he was the only Gryffindor. He had been surprised when Draco had turned up at the first lesson, but it seemed that he, like Harry, enjoyed the solitude the class provided. The rest of the class consisted of two Ravenclaws and a two Hufflepuffs, who all seemed to know each other and generally stuck together in the class. He set up his telescope in his usual spot on the other side of the tower from the group and rolled out a map of the night sky. A minute later, Draco appeared beside him and did the same. They spent the lesson in silence, as they did every other, but at the end, just as he was leaving, Draco leaned over and said; "You were right, Potter. The view from here is nowhere near as good as from down there." Harry gave a small smile as Draco left the tower and shortly after Harry rolled up his own map and packed up his telescope, and headed back to Gryffindor Tower.

oOo

On the last day of term, Harry was feeling particularly dejected. No one he knew was staying at Hogwarts this year. In fact, he didn't know of anyone else who would be, and despite what he had told Neville, was not really looking forward to two weeks of having absolutely no company. The fact that he was still fighting with Ron and Hermione was particularly depressing. He had bought presents for both of them, mainly because it didn't feel right for it to be

Christmas and not buy any presents at all. He sat on his bed in the empty dormitory holding the gifts. For Ron he had gotten a good quality pair of Quidditch gloves. They were warm and tough, and embroidered with the emblem of the Chudley Cannons. For Hermione, he had bought yet another book. He had tried to -

find something different, but in the end he had spotted the book and known it was something Hermione would love. Coming to a quick decision, he opened Ron's trunk and buried the gloves and book at the bottom of Ron's trunk. Hopefully he would find them when he unpacked at the Burrow. Sighing and hoping the peace offerings would have some effect, he left the dorm and made his way down to the Christmas feast.

oOo

Harry slept late the next morning, not even waking to the bangs and clunks of trunks being moved about. When he woke, his dorm mates were all gone and there was utter silence. Deciding he couldn't lie in bed all day, Harry swung his legs over the side of the bed and felt his foot hit something. Leaning forward, he saw a package wrapped in shiny Christmas paper. He frowned, leaning down, and his face split into an enormous grin when he saw the tag attached. It said 'From Ron and Hermione.' Suddenly feeling much more cheerful, Harry set the parcel at the end of his bed and got dressed, before heading down to the common room. There was no one else there and Harry once again wondered if he was the only Gryffindor staying this holidays. Now that Voldemort was back and everyone knew it, most people seemed to want to spend as much time with their families as was possible. However, now that he knew Ron and Hermione didn't completely hate him, he found the thought of spending the holidays alone wasn't half as bad as he had been thinking the previous night.

It was too late for breakfast, but it was only an hour and a half until lunch, so Harry brought some holiday homework down to an armchair beside the fireplace and spent the time working on a charms essay. When 12:10 came, Harry's stomach rumbled and he shoved his stuff onto the floor and headed for the portrait hole. The corridors were totally silent, but when Harry reached the Great Hall he found a few people seated, waiting for lunch to be served. Unfortunately, they

were all teachers. The house tables were gone, and everyone was seated at a smaller table in the middle of the hall. Harry walked over slowly and dropped into a seat away from the teachers, muttering a polite hello. They smiled and replied, before going back to their conversation. Harry didn't know any of them, but they were soon joined by McGonagall, Flitwick and Sprout, who all greeted him warmly. The table was nearly full when Dumbledore and Snape joined them. The headmaster greeted Harry, but Snape only sneered. Dumbledore took a seat next to McGonagall, leaving only a seat on either side of Harry. Snape grimaced and scowled at the headmaster, who's beard twitched as he surveyed the seating options. The Potions Master growled and sank into the seat next to the headmaster, fixedly ignoring Harry. Harry leaned forward around Snape and addressed Dumbledore. "Sir, are there any other students staying for the break?"

"Yes, Harry, one other I believe. As soon as he gets here we can begin lunch."

Harry was about to ask who when he heard the chair beside him being slid out from the table. Harry turned and his heart sunk when he saw the Slytherin. Of all people it had to be Malfoy. Harry snorted, turning back to the table.

"Something funny, Potter?"

"No. Want to swap places?" Harry could think of no worse place than sitting between Snape and Malfoy. It was sure to be a lunch of little conversation.

-

"That would be entirely improper, Potter."

Several teachers laughed and Harry blushed, scowling at Malfoy. Then, exactly at 12:30, the table was filled with food. Despite the fact that he was starving, Harry waited until everyone else had served themselves before he served himself. He ate slowly, not wanting to be the first person finished. Gradually, teachers began to move off, and when he thought enough had left, Harry excused himself and



stood, exiting the Great Hall. He was walking through the Entrance Hall when he heard his name called from behind. Turning, he saw Malfoy strolling leisurely behind him.

“Something you wanted, Malfoy?”

“I’m quite bored, and you are the only person here for me to torment.”

“Lucky me,” muttered Harry. “Don’t you normally go home for the holidays?”

“I felt there were better things for me to do here this year. Besides, Mother has gone abroad to visit relatives and Father is unable to be at the Manor.”

“In prison, you mean?” sniped Harry.

Malfoy’s face reddened and Harry felt a little guilty. “Not for long, Potter. He’ll be out of there in no time. He should be out already, it’s just taking a little longer than expected!”

“Whatever, Malfoy. Is there something specific you wanted, or did you just want to ‘torment’ me?”

Malfoy scowled, but replied. “I wanted to know if you could take me down to the chamber. You know how we talked about harvesting parts from the basilisk.”

Harry nodded, interested.

“I really want to get Severus some parts as a gift.”

“Fine. Do you know how to do it? Because I have no idea.”

“Of course you don’t, Potter. You’re an idiot.”

“Watch it Malfoy. You won’t get down there talking to me that way.”

“What I meant was, I’ve been reading. I found a book with instructions and it’s the same as harvesting parts from any other poisonous reptile,

so you probably actually do have some idea. It's really not difficult. It won't take long at all to get enough for a gift, and we can get some for ourselves, of course."

"Fine. Let's do it now, then. It's only five days till Christmas anyway." Harry was glad to have something to do, even if it was with Malfoy. Besides, this was why he had told Malfoy about the chamber.

"Excellent!" said Malfoy, clapping his hands and rubbing them together.

Five minutes later, they found themselves in the girl's bathroom, and another five found them standing beside the basilisk. Malfoy pulled a bag out of his robe pockets and enlarged it. Setting it on -

the ground, he began pulling out items; dragonhide gloves, tweezers, clips, crystal vials, and assorted other things. Harry narrowed his eyes as Malfoy laid them out in a row. "You knew I'd say yes, didn't you?"

"Well, you are very easy to persuade. Oh, come on, don't look like that. You know you want to do this too."

Harry sighed. "True." He got down on his knees beside Malfoy and the other boy proceeded to explain the function of some of the implements. Harry particularly liked the vials. The light hit them and created all the colours of the rainbow in the clear glass. At least Harry thought it was glass. He was proved wrong, however, when Malfoy took it from him. "Careful with that, Potter. This vial was enormously expensive. I only got two of them, because of the cost. The outside is glass, but the inside is diamond. Diamond is the only substance that can hold basilisk venom. It melts straight through anything else. We'll leave the venom until last, though. First I want to get some scales. If we get, say, fifty, that'll last him a fair while."

"Yeah, well. If he runs out then there's another hundred thousand scales down here."

"Exactly. Follow me, and bring a pair of pullers. Wear that other pair of gloves." Malfoy pulled on his own gloves and Harry followed him

over o the huge snake. Malfoy took his pair of pullers and set a small stone box on the ground. He positioned himself against the basilisk and turned his head towards Harry. "You do it like this. It's really simple. Just slide the flat half of the pullers under, close them, like so, and pull." He pulled, and after a little tug, a small green-grey scale slipped free, held between the pullers. Malfoy bent and deposited it in the stone box. "Easy, see. Even you can do this," he said mockingly. "Just try not to snap or break them. If a potion requires a whole scale to be added and it's broken, or even has a hairline fracture, the whole thing could explode. Also, over time, a broken scale will release its power and after a while it'd be completely worthless. That's another reason these things are so expensive. So, no breaks! Snape's an expert of course, and he'd check for those things, but still, it'd be nice to give him a perfect set."

Harry and Malfoy set to it, working quietly, and after only fifteen minutes, between them both had accumulated fifty fine scales.

"Why are these scales so good compared to any other snake, anyway?" asked Harry.

"Because it's from a magic snake, you idiot. Potter, I don't think you realise just how rare and expensive these ingredients are. They aren't easy to come by at all. People would kill for these things, literally. Luckily they're quite potent, and you only need tiny amounts in potions, so the parts go a long way. Still though, for a whole basilisk, you could get tens of thousands of galleons. You literally have a gold field here."

"Oh."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Let's do the venom now. We have to be extremely careful here. Dragonhide is fairly resistant to the venom, but eventually it'll wear a hole, and you don't want this stuff on your skin."

"Malfoy, I've had that in my skin. Flowing through my blood."

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“And what a hero you are, Potter, now come on,” said Malfoy sarcastically, but then he paused. “How did you survive anyway? This stuff is really toxic, even in small amounts, and I heard you had a whole fang stuck in your arm.”

“Fawkes. Dumbledore’s phoenix saved me. You know, phoenix tears, they’ve got heal-“

“Yes, Potter, I know about the properties of phoenix tears. You are one lucky bastard though.”

“I know,” said Harry quietly.

They were standing near the head of the basilisk now, and Harry helped Malfoy lever open the large mouth, propping it there with a metal bar Malfoy produced from his put together harvesting kit.

“Merlin! That is rank!” coughed Malfoy, turning his nose up at the smell that came from the mouth of the dead snake. Harry quite agreed, it was dreadful, and he pulled his shirt up over his nose. It didn’t help. “Let’s get this done as quickly as possible.”

“We can’t rush Potter. This is much more delicate than pulling scales.” Malfoy pulled the diamond vials from his pocket, handing one to Harry. “Do. Not. Drop. I swear, I will skin you alive.”

“I’m perfectly capable of holding something without dropping it Malfoy.”

Malfoy didn’t reply. Instead, he pulled a flat piece of dragonhide from his pocket and placed it over the opening of the vial, tying it to the sides with string. Then, very carefully, he placed the flat surface of the dragonhide against the remaining fang and pushed lightly. The fang pierced the hide easily, but Malfoy only let it make a small hole. Nothing came out, but Malfoy tapped the fang with his wand and muttered something Harry couldn’t hear. Immediately, venom began a steady drip into the vial. It was slow, and took a good half hour to fill the vial with the translucent green liquid. By the time it was done, Harry was thoroughly bored of watching. “Are we nearly done?”

“We need to fill up the other vial, and then I want some of the small teeth.”

Harry looked into the snake’s mouth. The fangs were the biggest teeth, the others growing smaller the further back in the mouth they were, though all were razor sharp. Inside of the outermost row, however, were hundreds of tiny teeth lining the snake’s mouth. “You can fill the second vial, you remember what to do?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. My arm is killing me. While you do that, I’ll get as many teeth as I can.” He pulled out a small jar and unscrewed the lid. “This jar is lined with diamond too. Not as thick as the vials though. These teeth don’t have venom in them, but they might have venom on the outside, and it’s better to be on the safe side.” As Harry copied Malfoy’s earlier actions with the fang, the blonde boy took a different pair of pullers and carefully began to pull tiny teeth from the basilisk’s mouth, placing them gently into the jar. When he had gathered about forty, he sat back to watch Harry’s vial slowly filling.

Fifteen minutes later, Harry capped the vial and handed it to Malfoy. “Anything else?”

“No, I think that’s all for now. Severus’ll love this. I can’t wait till he sees it!”

“What about blood?”

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Malfoy cocked his head to the side. “Huh. I never even thought of that. Well, turns out you’re good for something after all!”

Harry rolled his eyes. It was becoming a common motion when he was around Draco. If he wasn’t careful his eyes would become permanently rolled back in his head.

“We’ll have to string it up and cut its throat or something. Hm... We need something for the blood to collect in.”

Harry walked over to Malfoy's bag and pulled out a large glass jar. "We could use this. Just enlarge it. Wait, is the blood corrosive like the venom?"

"It is, but not nearly as much. That jar is crystal, so it'll hold it fine. There's going to be a lot of blood though."

"That doesn't matter. What you don't give to Snape can just stay here. The charms on the place will keep it fresh."

"True. Alright." Malfoy turned to the basilisk and pointed his wand, casting a charm so that the huge snake hung from the air. Harry had a feeling he had seen the spell in use before, but on people. Harry placed the jar beneath the snake and cast an enlargement charm on it. It was just big enough. He then cast a cutting charm at the neck of the snake while Malfoy held it in the air.

Blood began pouring from the snake, and both boys stepped back from the splashes of blood. The large jar began to fill, and eventually the rush of blood became a trickle, and then a drip. Malfoy lowered the snake to the ground and they stared at the huge container of ruby red liquid. Malfoy walked over to his bag and returned with a large jar. He magically siphoned blood into the jar before sealing it and casting a non-breakable charm on the jar. He smiled gleefully and gathered together the jar of blood, teeth, vials of venom and stone box of scales. "Severus is going to die when he sees this!"

"You keep saying that," said Harry, amused.

"Well he will. He's really into Potions and these ingredients... he'll be able to make potions that almost no man ever has the chance to make! Most people who use these ingredients do it in big groups, because they're so expensive and everyone wants to see the end result. To have all this to yourself is fantastic."

At that point, Harry's stomach rumbled and he glanced at his watch. His eyebrows shot up. It was nearly time for dinner! "Come on, were going to be late for dinner if we don't hurry. I didn't realise how much time had passed!"

“They’ll all be waiting for us too. Alright, just let me pack these things up.”

Harry waited impatiently as Malfoy carefully placed the gift in the bag, along with all the tools. Then, they left the chamber and shortly arrived in the Great Hall. Luckily, there were only a few teachers present.

-

Snape gave them a strange look when they entered the Great Hall together, but they took separate places at the table. Malfoy sat down next to Snape and engaged him in conversation, while Harry took a seat next to Hagrid.

“How are ye, Harry?”

“Good Hagrid. What about you?”

“Not bad meself. What’ve ye bin up to t’day?”

“Just doing homework mostly. I want to get it out of the way.”

“Best way to go, that is. Then ye get th’ rest of yer holidays to yerself.”

Harry smiled. “That’s the plan. How are the kneazles going, Hagrid?”

“Oh, they’re doin lov’ly! Ye should come down an’ see em tomorra, if ye get the chance. Growin’ beautif’ly, they are,” replied Hagrid proudly.

“I will, after lunch, maybe?”

“I’ll be waitin’.”

oOo

That night, Harry went to the school library and took out a text book on runes. There were runes all over the chamber, and he was quite interested to know if he could translate them. Even more, he wanted to know what the ones on his wand meant. He read through the lengthy introduction and started on a history of the runic alphabet and its variants. He didn't see any runes that looked familiar, and at ten he returned to the common room. During the holidays, curfew was extended until 10:30, for which Harry was grateful. He wouldn't have been able to stand sitting around in the common room all evening alone.

oOo

The next afternoon Harry took his broom when he went down to meet Hagrid, and after a light afternoon tea, Harry walked over to the Quidditch pitch. It had been a while since he had flown outside of Quidditch, and he happily took to the air, loving the feel of the crisp air whipping around him. He had been flying for a while and was beginning to feel a bit bored with the repetitive loops around the pitch when another figure appeared beside him. Harry pulled up. "Malfoy, what are you doing out here?"

"Flying. I would have thought that would be obvious."

"I thought maybe you were here to 'torment' me some more."

Malfoy smirked. "I'm sure I could, but mostly I just came out to fly. Believe it or not, everything I do does not revolve around you."

"Whatever. I've been flying for a while and I was getting kind of bored. I was thinking of flying to Hogsmeade. Want to come?"

-

"We aren't allowed, Potter. Just because it's the holidays doesn't mean we can leave the castle whenever we want."

"If you're afraid of getting into trouble you don't have to come, but I'm still going."



“McGonagall will give you detention when she finds out. And I’m not afraid.”

“McGonagall won’t find out, Malfoy, because nobody is going to tell her.”

“Why would I pass up the chance to get you a detention, Potter?”

“Because I won’t take you to the chamber,” replied Harry, smirking.

Malfoy scowled. “You can’t say that every time I do something you don’t like, Potter.”

“Well it seems to be working pretty well so far. Are you coming or not? I’m not going to wait any longer.”

Malfoy cast a glance at the castle before grudgingly giving in. “Fine, but only if we go to the chamber tonight.”

“Deal. I was going there anyway. Race you.” With that, Harry took off, racing Malfoy over the Forbidden Forest and then along the lane that led to Hogsmeade. The sun was setting as they reached the small wizarding village, and Harry slowed, twisting leisurely in the air.

“What now? Did you have some kind of plan once we got here, or did you not think that far ahead?”

“I’m cold. Let’s go into the Three Broomsticks and get butterbeer.”

“Not there, Potter. We might see someone we know. The Hogs Head is much quieter.”

“Okay.” They flew up a little further to a shabbier area of the town.

They dismounted their brooms in the quiet street and pushed open the door of the pub. Standing their brooms next to the door, they made their way over to a table. They walked up to the bar where an old man with a long grey beard stood, cleaning out glasses with a filthy rag. Harry pulled some coins out of his pocket and put them on the counter. “A butterbeer, please.”

“And a firewhisky for me,” added Malfoy, and Harry looked at him with wide eyes. Malfoy shot him a warning look as the bartender turned to get their drinks. They grabbed their respective drinks and made their way over to a dark corner, sitting on opposite sides of the stained wooden table. “You shouldn’t have got that Malfoy! We aren’t even of age yet!”

“Oh, so what, Potter. I’m not a child either.”

Harry snorted. “That’s debatable.”

Malfoy scowled over his alcoholic drink. “Feel free to tell whoever you want, Potter, but I doubt that would work out well for either of us.”

Harry sat back, scowling, and eyed his butterbeer sourly. “What does it taste like, anyway?”

-

Malfoy smirked. “You aren’t telling me you’ve never had firewhisky!? Ha! Saint Potter the pure, hey?”

“Well I don’t exactly have the chance much! Give me a taste.”

“Get your own if you want some.”

“I already paid for a butterbeer! Come on, just a sip.”

“The answer is no, Potter. I’m not letting some half-blood drink out of my glass.”

Harry bristled at the insult. “I don’t appreciate you insulting my parentage, Malfoy!”

“I did no such thing,” retorted the blond boy. “It’s simply a statement of fact. If you think it’s an insult, that’s merely a reflection on your own beliefs. If I was going for an insult I would have said half-mud-”

“Alright! There’s no need to say it now.” Harry pulled the top off his butterbeer, scowling darkly.

They finished their drinks in silence and left the pub. Malfoy was humming slightly as they walked down the narrow street holding their brooms, and Harry grinned. It was dark now and Harry checked his watch. “Oh no! It’s past dinner!”

“Potter, we can go past the kitchens and get food.”

“But they would have been waiting for us.”

“No they wouldn’t. Dinner gets served at 7:30 regardless of who is at the table. We don’t have to be there.”

“Oh, okay then. You know how to get into the kitchens?”

“Of course I do.” Malfoy tossed his head arrogantly. “My father told me when I was in first year.”

...

Harry and Malfoy quietly slipped in through the doors of the Entrance Hall, careful to stay out of sight of the table in the Great Hall.

“Still want to go to the chamber?”

“Of course.”

“If you take your broom back to the dorms, I could get food from the kitchens and meet you there. It’ll take you too long to stop and get food.”

Malfoy nodded. “Alright, but get something decent, Potter. Not sandwiches.”

oOo

Harry found Malfoy already waiting for him outside Myrtle's bathroom, looking extremely impatient. They made their way into the basilisk chamber and through to the library, where Harry set the food -

on the table. He had brought a bowl of salad, some potatoes, and a plate of lamb chops. Malfoy seemed fine with the selection, and Harry propped a book about Ancient Runes open on the table, reading while he ate.

"What's that?"

"Book about Ancient Runes."

"You don't take that subject."

"I know, but I find it quite interesting. I'm trying to find out what some of the runes around this room mean, and I want to know what the ones on the courtyard door say, so I can get back in."

"You could just ask me. I'm quite proficient in the subject."

Harry looked up, intrigued. "Really?"

"Yes. After we've eaten we can go look."

Harry nodded agreement and began shovelling food into his mouth.

"Don't choke, Potter. The way you are eating is highly disturbing."

"Sorry, just want to go have a look at the runes."

"If you're so interested, why don't you just pick up the subject?"

"I didn't do it in earlier years. I'd be so far behind."

"You could catch up over the holidays. If you worked hard, you'd have at least a basic understanding."

"Are we allowed to pick up subjects this late?"

"I don't see why not."

"I never even thought of it. I think I'll go see McGonagall tomorrow and talk to her about it."

...

Harry waited impatiently for Malfoy to finish eating before they went out to the courtyard, and Harry closed the door behind him.

"Hmm... Some of these runes I haven't seen before, but I think it's a dedication of the courtyard. I can make out several of the symbols. It's definitely not about how to get back in. I'll have to do a bit of research if I want to translate this properly."

Harry was disappointed. "How do we get back in then?"

Malfoy smirked. "Quite easily, I think. There's no hidden handle or secret password." Harry watched as Malfoy reached out an arm and ran his finger down a long indentation that ran down the middle of the inscription. With a light click, the door appeared and opened inwards.

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"How did you know to do that?!"

"It's an old method, but quite well known, really. If you'd grown up among wizard's you probably would have known to do that, once you saw that groove in the rock."

"Well, at least I won't be stuck out there for hours on end again."

They walked back into the library and Harry stopped Malfoy. "Wait, there's some other runes I want you to look at." He pulled out his wand and held it up for Malfoy. "Know what they mean?"

"Nice wand... I've never seen one with runes before."

"That's what Hermione said. I hadn't either."

"I didn't know Ollivander sold wands like this."

"He doesn't. I got it from Bezzemer's."

Malfoy's eyes widened. "Bezzemer's! Interesting... you know, they have a bit of a reputation for-"

Harry cut him off. "So I've heard. So, do you know what the runes mean?"

Malfoy inspected the wand. "Hmm... I think this one here means power..., and this one might be the symbol for magic. Some of these I haven't even seen before. I'll have to do some research, same as the door... what core does this have?

"Dragon heartstring, coated in basilisk venom."

"No wonder it was expensive. I've never even heard of a wand with basilisk venom before. What wood is it? Some kind of ash?"

"Yeah, Yggdrasil. It's made of yew too though, the Yggdrasil cases it."

"Interesting... Yggdrasil has many magical properties. I think its purpose here is to contain the basilisk venom. Or maybe the reaction between the venom and the heartstring. Those are both powerful ingredients."

"Well, it's definitely a good wand. Better than my old one, I think."

"Hm. So, what are we doing now? I was going to read, but I don't really feel like it now."

Harry thought for a second. "How about we see where that tunnel showed you goes. If it comes out in the dungeons it might be a bit quicker for you to get down here."

Malfoy's face lit with interest. "Alright! Good idea."

They made their way over to the damp tunnel and lit their wands. After a minute of walking, they came to the tightly winding staircase. Harry started up, and Malfoy followed him. For nearly two minutes the stairs wound up and up, until finally they came out into a small opening in the rock. Four separate tunnels led off from the small space, in addition to the one they had just come through.

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“Which way?” whispered Harry, and Malfoy shrugged. They stood for a moment, trying to decide on a direction to take when Malfoy suddenly pointed. “There! Look, above each door, there’s a symbol. Slytherin must be that way!”

Harry looked, and sure enough above each doorway a symbol was engraved into the rock. The one Draco had pointed to was of a snake, and the others were the symbols of the other houses; a lion, badger, and raven. “Huh. To Slytherin, then.”

Malfoy took the lead this time, and Harry followed him into the dark tunnel. It led for about twenty metres before they reached another small space with multiple openings. There were four openings again, but this time runes were engraved above the entrances. “Well? You’re the expert here, Malfoy.”

Malfoy stood for a moment, looking over the runic symbols. “I think,” he said slowly, “that that one there says teacher- something. I’m not sure what the second part is. The one next to it says... something chambers. The next one I’m pretty sure is the symbol for student. The last one... I’m not sure of at all.”

“Which way do you want to go? Your choice.”

“Hm. Well, seeing as we are students, why don’t we try that one.”

“Alright. Lead on, Malfoy.”

Malfoy crossed the space and walked through the tunnel he had decided on. Almost immediately, they came to another set of stairs, though these ones ended after only about thirty seconds of climbing.

In front of them, set into the stone, was a golden door with snakes with emerald eyes on it.

Malfoy smirked and imitated Harry. "Well," he drawled, glancing back at Harry, "You're the expert here, Potter."

Harry stepped forward and ran a hand down the door. "Open," he hissed, and the door slid, surprisingly quietly, out of sight, revealing a shadowy wall about two feet in front of them. A flickering light came to the left and they stepped out into the dark, narrow space between the door and the wall. Harry recognised the room at once. "Excellent!" crowed Malfoy, clapping his hands. "The Slytherin Common Room! I always wondered why that weird little nook was there."

Harry looked back. He couldn't see where they had stepped through into the room, the doorway was hidden by stone bricks that seemingly formed the wall of the common room. Set into the bricks was a medium sized gold statue of the house's founder, with a snake hung around his neck.

"Well, now you don't have to go all the way through the castle to get to the chamber," said Harry. "It'll take you two minutes instead of twenty."

"Yeah!" Then Malfoy's face fell. "Except I bet it requires a password, and I can't speak Parseltongue."

"I can teach you. It shouldn't be too hard to learn one word."

"Potter, there are very few people who can speak Parseltongue."

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"It's just a language, Malfoy, and any language can be learned. Besides, it's one word."

"I suppose..."

Harry laughed at Malfoy's still disappointed face. "Oh, come on, Malfoy. It's not that bad. You'll learn it in no time. Come on, I want to



see where some of those other tunnels led. I bet they go everywhere in the castle. Those other ones must go to the other houses.”

Malfoy dropped his sullen act and followed Harry back around to the hidden doorway, which had closed behind them. Harry hissed the password and they descended the cold, narrow step until they came to the small opening. This time, they tried the one that Malfoy had thought said ‘something chambers.’ This one led to stairs as well, but at the top was a much wider path that led for about a minute until they came to a dead end. On the wall was a beautiful painting, about two metres wide by three tall, that reached from floor to ceiling. It sat in an ornate gold frame decorated with small golden leaves and vines, and the picture itself was of a dark forest, with sunlight shining down through the canopy. The foliage was dense and lush, and a small stony creek ran through the middle of the painting, fed by a roaring waterfall that ran over a flat rock cliff. Harry could hear the sound of running water and could almost smell a fresh, earthy smell. Suddenly, a faint wind moved the trees in the painting, and Harry felt the same wind on his face. He glanced at Malfoy, who had evidently felt the same. Harry looked back at the arresting picture. He felt that if he reached his hand out, he would be able to touch the water, and he did so. He snatched his hand back when he felt the frigid water hit his hand. His fingers were now dripping, and droplets of water dotted the back of his hand. Within seconds, the water had dried, much faster than it should have in the cool damp corridor.

“I’ve seen this picture before...”whispered Malfoy.

Harry stared at him. “What? Where?”

Malfoy frowned. “I’m... not sure.” This time, Malfoy stuck his hand out and into the cold water. He gasped when he touched it, but instead of drawing back, he pushed his hand right through up to the wrist.

“What is it? What do you feel?”

Malfoy frowned. “Just water.” Harry watched as Malfoy moved closer and stuck his whole arm into the water. “I think... I can feel air.” He looked at Harry, who shrugged. “After you, Malfoy.”

With that, Malfoy turned and pushed his head under the waterfall, and after a moment, he stepped into the painting. Harry stared wide eyed as Malfoy disappeared into the waterfall, spray hitting his back and rebounding off onto Harry. As soon as Malfoy had gone, Harry moved forwards and stood with his nose to the painting. Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the icy roaring waterfall.

Yay! Long chapter! Next chapter update soon. Please please please review : )

## A Foray into the Muggle World

Harry stood, freezing water pounding down on his head and cascading over his shoulders. He kept his eyes tightly shut and took a tentative step forward, then another. With the second step, he found the water was no longer on his face and opened his eyes. He nearly screamed when he saw Malfoy, wet and bedraggled in front of him. "Shite, Malfoy!"

The blonde laughed at Harry's surprise as Harry stepped out of the water. They were in a small cave, it seemed, that was barely half a metre deep, but in front of them, instead of more cave, was another waterfall. Harry turned around, and found himself staring at an identical image. When he turned back, Malfoy was dry, and trying to avoid the water on both sides. Harry stood beside him, and looked around. The cave was about a metre wide, just bigger than the waterfall, and Harry reached out a hand to run it over the rough rock. He gasped when his hand went through the rock, sending shockwaves through it. It felt strange, like static electricity, and Harry pulled his hand back. "Did you see that?"

Malfoy tried to look around Harry, but couldn't without getting wet. "No, what?"

"Touch the walls."

Malfoy did so, and Harry heard him gasp as well.

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"Do you think... we're actually in a painting? You know how the people in the portraits can get around to all the other portraits in the castle?"

Malfoy frowned thoughtfully. "I don't know. I'm not sure this is actually painting. It looked like it, but you can't walk into a painting, at least I've never heard of it."

"What do you think is on the other side?"

“Only one way to find out,” replied Malfoy, and together they stepped through the mirror image waterfall.

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Harry opened his eyes and shook the water from his hair. Beside him, Malfoy did the same. Straightening up, Harry looked around at the room they had come out in. The walls were stone and it appeared they were in a lounge. Two armchairs and a lounge sat in front of a roaring fire, and heavy curtains hung along a far wall.

“I knew it!” whispered Malfoy.

“What? Where are we?”

Malfoy turned around and Harry did the same, noticing that they were both dry already. On the wall was an exact copy of the painting they had just come through. “I knew I had seen this picture before. We’re in Severus’ personal chambers! That must have been what the runes I couldn’t translate said – personal, or something like it.”

A broad grin split Harry’s face as he turned to survey the room. “Snape would go absolutely ballistic if he knew I was in his private rooms!” he said gleefully. He clapped his hands together and skipped over to the plush green lounge, flopping down onto it. Malfoy walked over and glared at him, though he appeared slightly amused. “If you think he wouldn’t want you in here, then maybe you shouldn’t lay around on his furniture.”

“Oh, come on Malfoy. He’ll never know I was here. Besides, I’m not breaking anything.” Harry relaxed in the warmth of the fire.

“That’s the window I was telling you about, there.” Malfoy pointed to the heavy curtains, and Harry got up, walking over to them. He raised his wand and opened them, letting moonlight spill into the dim room. Malfoy had been right, it was practically the same view as from the chamber, only from higher up. It was magnificent. From here, more of the cliff top forest was visible.

Then, Harry's heart dropped out of his chest as he heard a door open behind them. Snape coming back from dinner! He froze and Snape would have seen him if Malfoy hadn't grasped him by the neck of his robes and yanked him down behind the lounge. Forget ballistic, Snape would kill him! He looked at Malfoy in terror, and the other boy put a finger to his lips. They heard a rustling of fabric as Snape hung his cloak, then footsteps moved across to the lounge. Suddenly, the footsteps stopped and Harry heard a grunt. Harry looked behind him to see the curtains, which must have been closed last time Snape had been in here. Malfoy seemed to have come to the same conclusion, for his eyes widened. The footsteps resumed, this time coming over to the lounge. Suddenly the curtains were -

swept back across the window and the lounge shifted as Snape took a seat. For a few minutes, there was complete silence in the room, then Snape got up and left the room. Harry started to get up, but Malfoy pulled him back down and motioned for him to stay. Then, Malfoy stood and went over to the door Snape had come in. He got there just as Snape walked back into the lounge, and Harry ducked back down.

"Draco," came Snape's smooth voice, "I didn't hear you come in. Did you just get here?"

"Yes. I came by earlier but you weren't here."

"Did you open the curtains? I was sure I closed them."

"Oh, er... yea, I think I might have. Sorry about that."

"No matter. Is there something specific you wanted?"

"Oh, no. I just came to talk."

"Where were you at dinner?"

"Flying for a while, then I went to the common room. I wasn't really hungry."

“I see. So you have no idea where Potter is? He too was absent from dinner.”

“None whatsoever.”

“Hm.” The lounge shifted as Snape took a seat again, and Harry kept as still as possible. Draco’s voice sounded from over near the fireplace. “Have you heard from my father lately?”

There was a moment of silence before Snape replied, and it sounded like Snape had leaned forward. “I have. With any luck, he shall have his release very soon.”

Harry frowned at the conversation, but peeking out from behind the lounge, he saw that all of Snape’s attention was fixed on Malfoy.

Malfoy saw Harry, and his eyes flickered briefly to the painting just behind and to the left of Snape.

Moving slowly and as silently as possible, Harry crept over to the painting as Snape continued to inform Malfoy about his father.

He reached the painting, and as quickly as he could, he jumped through the waterfall, taking an extra step to get into the dry space in between. Shivering, he braved the second waterfall and found himself back in the tunnel. He waited a few seconds and felt himself dry off, but he was still cold. Pulling his robes tight around him he began walking, before he remembered he had another way to get around. Smiling, he pulled the pendant from his shirt and seconds later he was standing in front of the fire in the Gryffindor common room. He grinned and sunk into a comfortable armchair, where he fell asleep.

oOo

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The next morning at breakfast Harry ate quickly and then waited in the Entrance hall for Malfoy. It seemed Malfoy had only been waiting for him to finish, because after only a minute the Slytherin appeared

at his side and favoured him with a completely neutral look. "So, Potter, what are we doing today?"

"You assume I want to spend the day with you Malfoy?"

Malfoy smirked. "You were waiting for me, Potter."

"Whatever. I hadn't really thought about it really."

Harry perused the walls as Malfoy put forward suggestions. "Thanks for letting me get out last night, by the way. Snape would have skinned me alive if he'd caught me."

Malfoy laughed. "He heard you when you went through the painting. I think he sort of saw the water spray out a bit, but just out of the corner of his eye. He looked a bit suspicious for a second, but he didn't really think anything of it."

"Haha. Did you go back to the chamber last night? If you go through Snape's room, you don't even need to learn the password. "Nah, I went back to the Slytherin dorms. I don't always know his password, though. If I tell him I'm going to come and see him he'll tell me so I can wait in there for him, but he changes it fairly regularly."

"Guess I'll still have to teach you then."

There was a moment of strained silence before Harry said; "Why don't just go flying? We can leave the school, take some lunch. I want to explore a bit. I've only ever been to Hogsmeade."

Malfoy thought about it for a second before agreeing. "Alright. I'll get the food this time and I'll meet you on the Quidditch pitch at 9:00."

Harry nodded and dashed up the stairs to get his broom. He grabbed his cloak as well, because it looked like snow, and his invisibility cloak too. He picked up Salazar, who he had brought back with him when the holidays began. Then, with the little snake curled around his arm, he made his way down to the pitch. He was a little early, so he kicked off and practised some moves until he saw Malfoy appear in the stands. He flew over and waited while Malfoy joined him in the air,

then they took off towards the Forbidden forest, flying low in case someone was looking. Instead of following the lane to Hogsmeade, they turned south and flew over the white countryside. After about an hour, they saw buildings in the distance.

Harry followed Malfoy when he veered off to a small copse of trees beside a road, and they hid their brooms there before continuing on foot to the muggle town. The dirt road was quiet, but very soon they came to a bitumen road lined with small businesses. At one point, Harry only just managed to yank Malfoy back in time, when he stepped out into the road in front of a passing car. "Watch where you're going, Malfoy! You almost got hit!"

Malfoy scowled at Harry, but looked about uneasily.

"Have you ever even been in a muggle town before?" asked Harry.

-

"My father took me into Muggle London sometimes when I was younger, and we have a house on Kensington Avenue, but I don't really leave that except by floo. What are those things call again? Otomobees or something?"

Harry let out a loud laugh. "I think maybe you mean automobiles," explained Harry, and Malfoy's face lit in recognition, "But everyone just calls them cars."

Malfoy stuck close to Harry, and listened when Harry (trying not to laugh) explained how to look left, right and left again before crossing the road. Deciding to look for somewhere to eat, they came to a broad expanse of parkland, covered in winter snow. At one end, the tumbling ruins of an old church sat on a low hill, looking out over the land, and the two boys headed for the stone remains. The church was set between two towering trees, whose trunks were both over a metre across. Stalactites of ice hung from ledges of rock that lined the windows and roof of the church, and a coating of ice made the stone glisten in a brief moment of sunshine, before a cloud plunged the land into shadow again. The old ruin was ominously silent and they said nothing as they walked through the entry. Long ago, large



wooden doors had covered the arch, but one now hung brokenly from the hinges that were rusted with time, and the other lay in splinters on the ground. Both were rotting and spotted with mould.

The inside of the church was, like all old stone buildings of the kind, beautiful in its age and mystery. The roof was higher than usual, and crumbling stone steps led from one side of the room up to a higher level. Light shining through the stained glass window above the entrance cast muted colours of green, blue and red over the stone, and their footsteps echoed loudly in the silence.

The ground was covered in damp, rotting leaves, and Harry agreed when Malfoy suggested they try upstairs. Harry tentatively placed his weight on the bottom stair. They were crumbling, and chunks of rock had broken off, smashing on the church floor. Malfoy, however, raced up the stairs and Harry decided it was safe enough. When he reached the second level, he found they were in a bell tower. Above them hung an old iron bell, but the centre was missing, and the bell would remain forever silent. Parts of the wall were knocked out on all sides, with the largest portion at the front of the tower. From about 20cm off the floor to just above their heads, the gaping hole provided them with a spectacular view of the surrounding land. Looking out through a smaller hole in one side, Harry could see the town. "It's bigger than I thought." They were on the outskirts of quite a sizeable town, tall buildings rising against the skyline a few kilometres from where they stood. Houses and small buildings spread out before them, eventually giving way to open fields.

Harry turned back to find Malfoy sweeping sticks and leaves to the side with his foot, and Harry did the same before folding his cloak and sitting down on it. Malfoy followed suit. The floor was a bit damp, and neither wanted their clothes to get wet. The Slytherin pulled out a bag of food from his pocket and pulled out an assortment of foods.

After eating, Harry leaned back and patted his stomach. They sat in silence for a few minutes looking out at the snow before Malfoy said suddenly, "Let's terrorise some muggles!"

Harry tried not to laugh. "We are not going to terrorise muggles because you're bored."

"I don't mean do anything bad, just... have some fun."

-

Harry was against the idea on principal, but the longer he thought about it, the more enticing the idea became. He rolled his eyes. "I can't believe I'm letting you convince me to do this."

Harry stood and took his invisibility cloak from his pocket. Malfoy's eyes lit up at the sight of the silvery cloak. "Excellent!"

They descended to the lower level of the church where Harry threw the cloak over them both. Then, making sure their feet were covered, they left the church and made their way across the snow. Three hundred metres away there was an area where the snow had been cleared and there were several picnic benches and a playground. There were quite a few muggles scattered around the park, mostly mothers with small children. Malfoy nudged him. "Over there, see that girl sitting by herself?"

Harry looked where Malfoy pointed. A lone girl, probably a few years older than them, sat reading "Yeah? Got a plan?"

Malfoy frowned. "No. Let's get closer."

Slowly, they crept up behind the girl, who appeared to be thoroughly engrossed in her book. Harry drew to Malfoy to a halt when they stood not one metre from the girl. Harry's eyes lit upon the girl's handbag, which was sitting just behind her. He glanced at Malfoy who grinned mischievously. After checking that no one was watching, Malfoy reached out and grabbed the handbag, drawing it beneath the cloak. Then, they retreated ten metres and Malfoy put the bag down. Then, after stepping back a bit further, Harry picked up a small rock and threw it underhand at the girl's back.

The girl started when it hit her and turned, frowning, to see behind her. She eyed the area suspiciously, but there was no one behind her and it was as she was turning back to her book that she noticed the small brown bag sitting on the ground. Her eyes widened and both Harry

and Malfoy stifled a laugh as she jumped up, looking around at the other people in the park suspiciously. She hurried over to the bag, and as she did so, Harry felt Malfoy tug on his arm, pulling him over to where the girl had been sitting. Harry grinned as Malfoy picked up the girl's book and removed the bookmark, placing it at another page, then putting the book down several feet from where it had been.

The girl had now resumed her place and had just finished sorting through her bag, presumably to check that nothing was missing. Satisfied, she eyed her fellow park-goers once more before reaching for her book. Harry stifled another laugh as the girl froze and shot to her feet once more. She looked wildly around herself, then turned in a circle three times, before she saw the book. Harry couldn't help himself and let out a bark of laughter. Malfoy elbowed him, and Harry gasped. He started to laugh again, but Malfoy flung an arm around his neck and slapped a hand over his mouth as the girl ran over to get the book. Harry could feel Malfoy shaking with silent laughter as the girl gathered all her things together and quickly left the park, scowling at everyone around her.

After running a safe distance from the people, Harry and Malfoy broke down completely, falling to the ground as their laughter rang out. "Did you see her face?!"

"Merlin, that was hilarious!"

-

After they had calmed themselves, they made their way back to the street of the town they had been in earlier. It was a little difficult to keep out of people's way in the cloak, but they managed it and were now standing at the edge of the road waiting for the traffic lights to change. Harry briefly explained to Malfoy how the lights worked. Harry looked around as they waited and he saw a pine needle lying next to his boot. He bent down and picked it up, and at Malfoy's questioning look, motioned for Malfoy to move closer to the man who stood in front of them. Once they were close enough, Harry stuck the pine needle out and tickled the man's neck quickly.

They were rewarded as the man slapped at his neck, rubbing the itch. He put his hand down and Malfoy took the needle from Harry, tickling the man on the other side. Once again, the man slapped at his neck, this time turning slightly to frown at the empty air behind him. When he turned back, Malfoy stuck out the needle again, but at that point the lights changed and as the man started forward, Malfoy stuck his entire arm out of the cloak. Harry grabbed desperately at the extended arm, but he was too late. A feminine shriek sounded from beside them, and frightened whispers filled the air as people halted and gazed uncertainly at the air where Draco's arm had been.

Harry began tugging Draco away, but the Slytherin pulled back. Then, Draco began to laugh, a low, deep, menacing laugh that graduated to a psychotic sounding cackle. He cut off abruptly, and both boys watched as the muggles screamed and scattered. Finally, Draco allowed Harry to pull him away to a quiet Alley where Harry whipped off the cloak, and they fell against the wall, gasping for breath from laughing. "You are such an idiot Malfoy!" reprimanded Harry between laughs.

"That was classic!" said Malfoy, wiping a tear from his eye. "Ha!"

oOo

Eventually, after terrifying a few more unsuspecting people, Harry convinced Malfoy that it was time to go, and they made their way back to the small copse of trees where they has stashed their brooms. They got back to Hogwarts in the dark, but before dinner, and parted wordlessly in the Entrance Hall. Harry dashed up to Gryffindor Tower and washed up, then headed down to dinner. He was one of the last there, and they didn't have to wait long for the table to be filled with food.

After dinner, Harry left for Gryffindor Tower and fell asleep quickly.

oOo

The next day when Harry arrived at breakfast, he found the only other person to be there was Malfoy. "Hey."

Malfoy glanced up briefly from his Daily Prophet and scowled, jerking his head in acknowledgement. Harry sat quietly until breakfast was served. Still there were no teachers, and Harry thought perhaps that they were all sleeping in. He leaned across the table towards Malfoy as he reached for some bacon. "Want to go down to the chamber with me after? I was planning on spending the day there. I thought we could try out that duelling platform."

Malfoy ignored him for a few moments until he had finished whatever story he was reading before he looked up. "Fine," he said shortly, before turning his attention back to the newspaper. Harry ate -

slowly to match Malfoy's pace, but still finished first, and waited impatiently for Malfoy to finish his toast.

oOo

Down in the chamber, Harry led Malfoy into the Duelling Room. Standing at opposite ends of the platform, they assumed duelling positions. "Any rules?" asked Malfoy.

Harry thought for a minute. He was tempted to say the same rules they used in defence, but he wanted to practice duelling with someone who wasn't holding back. "No, not if you don't want any."

Malfoy raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Very well, Potter. Prepare to be throttled."

"No way, Malfoy. It's you who should watch out!"

They began.

"Calcoolius superner!" hissed Harry. He was quite fond of the Parseltongue spells.

He watched, surprised, as Malfoy retaliated with a wordless curse. "Been practising, Malfoy?"

"My father has been drilling wordless spells into me for years now, Potter. I'm quite proficient."

Harry renewed his attack, hissing out the Parseltongue spells in between dodging and blocking the jinxes and curses Malfoy threw. After four hours of duelling, Harry was becoming extremely tired. They were about even in the score, and Harry had to admit that Malfoy was a very good duellist, especially with his skill at wordless spells.

“Glacius ventos!”

Dodge

“Terra concito!”

Block

“Adficio sensus!”

A ‘finite incantantum’ on his dancing legs.

“Nox noctis!”

Block, block

“Tacta morseus!”

“What the-!” shouted Malfoy, slapping at his arms and nearly dropping his wand. He was doing a very good impression of Hermione, without the screaming. Harry cast a finite incantatum on Malfoy and flopped to the ground, sweaty and exhausted.

“Bloody hell, Potter! What was that one?”

Harry hissed out the spell, knowing full well that Malfoy wouldn’t understand. “In English perhaps?”

-

“Can’t say it in English.”

“Why not?”

“I already think I’m speaking English, so I can’t translate it.”

“Weird. Nasty spell, that one is. I would have liked to have learnt it.”

“Hm. What does it do anyway? Hermione really freaked out the other day.”

Malfoy snickered. “That was highly entertaining for the Slytherins, I hope you know. I don’t blame her though. It feels like lots of things with really sharp teeth are biting you all over.” Malfoy shivered.

“We should do some practice every day, if you want to that is. I need to practice, and you are definitely a challenge.” Harry was surprised, but happy with the challenge Draco presented. He knew spells that Harry had never heard of, and was exceptionally fast and agile. “Where’d you learn to duel like that anyway?”

“My father of course. He’s been training me since I was quite young.”

“Training for what?”

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. “What do you think, Potter?”

Harry sat up and considered Malfoy. “He’s training you to be a Death Eater?”

“Right in one. He always knew the Dark Lord would rise again. It was only a matter of time.”

“Are you a Death Eater?”

Malfoy snorted. “Do you really think I’d tell you that Potter?”

Harry shrugged. “I wouldn’t tell anyone, if you didn’t want me do.” He smiled. “What happens in the chamber, stays in the chamber.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes, and said after a while. “Even if I’m not already, I will be eventually. I don’t have a choice.”

“Why can’t you just say no? I know it would be hard, but it would be worth it in the end.”

“In your opinion, perhaps. Besides, one does not simply say ‘no’ to the Dark Lord.”

“But-“

“Drop it, Potter. I don’t wish to discuss this with you.” Malfoy stood and turned towards the door. “Remember this though, I am here for my own selfish purposes, and you brought me down here for your own. That doesn’t make us friends. I am not your friend, and you can never trust me. When I turn seventeen, I will take the Dark Mark, and there is nothing either of us can do about it. When that time comes, our association will most likely come to an end, because I will follow any orders I am given, and you probably won’t like them.”

-

Harry watched as Malfoy left the room, and he dropped his head into his hands. Despite the boy’s attitude, Harry couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. Malfoy was fated just as much as he was, following a path set for him before he was even born.

Hi guys! I personally don’t like this chapter too much, but the next one is much better in my opinion, so stick around if you didn’t like it either.

If anyone has any suggestions for what they might like to happen in the story, let me know. I’m sort of just writing as I go with only a very loose plan, so if you have any ideas, I could probably incorporate them into the story, if it fits with my ideas. I’m not even entirely sure how I want to end the story. If you think I’m going in a direction you don’t like, let me know that, too! Do people want Harry to work it out with Ron and Hermione soon, or wait a while? Any questions or comments? Please review! Reviewers make me smile!

tonksiscool and fhippogriff: good guess!

Next update within two days. : )



## Christmas

Harry dragged Malfoy down to the chamber again the day before Christmas. At least, 'drag' is the term Malfoy used, but Harry could tell the Slytherin was eager to go and was just trying to make life hard. "You sound like a five year old, Malfoy. Honestly, the amount of time you spend whingeing and whining."

"I do not whinge. That would be highly inappropriate for someone of my social standing."

"I think it's a requirement of someone of your 'social standing,' Malfoy."

They duelled until lunchtime and then went to the kitchens for food, retreating again to the chamber to eat it. After lunch, they sat reading various books in the library, Malfoy perusing a potions manual and Harry looking at a book of runes. After a while Harry put that one away and walked over to look at the section on dark arts and their defence. He wished for the hundredth time that he had not let Malfoy get away with the book he had bought. "Hey, Malfoy."

"Hm?" grunted Malfoy, engrossed in the potions manual.

"What happened to my book, do you know? The one Snape took?"

Malfoy looked up and smirked. "Ah, yes. The Dark Arts: An Historic Account. An extremely interesting and informative book. Snape let me read it for a while."

"What! He took it off of me and gave it to you?"

"He didn't give it to me, Potter. He just let me look at it. Very briefly, before he took it away."

"So do you know what he did with it? Did he give it to Dumbledore?"

"No, I believe he took it to him, but the headmaster suggested he might like to keep it."

“Dumbledore would never let Snape have a book like that!”

“Potter, Snape is so deeply entrenched in the Dark Arts that nothing could drag him out. He probably already knows every spell in that book and is just keeping it as a reference. Besides, Dumbledore doesn’t control Severus.”

“I can’t believe this! I paid good money for that book. They had no right to take it off of me!”

“So take it back, Potter.”

-

Harry paused in his pacing. “What?”

Malfoy sighed, exasperated. “Get. It. Back. If it were mine, I wouldn’t have even let anyone else get their hands on it.” He smirked at Harry’s angry scowl, then continued, “However, if I did allow a sneaky Slytherin to take it, and subsequently let it be confiscated, I would simply take it back.”

“I can’t just waltz into Snape’s quarters. I don’t know his password... Hey! You could find it out for me!”

Malfoy snorted. “Idiot Gryffindor. I am not helping you steal from my godfather. Besides, you don’t need a password, remember?”

Harry could have kicked himself. “Of course, the waterfall painting! And I could take my invisibility cloak in case Phineas or any other of the people in the paintings is visiting in there. No one would know it was me!”

“What would you do without me Potter?”

oOo

Christmas Day brought a snow storm that tormented the castle unendingly. Looking out the window, Harry could see only whiteness, and he could hear wind whistling around the castle. Inside however,

he was comfortably warm, and he dragged his meagre pile of present up onto the bed. He skipped breakfast, even though he thought it would be rude to do on Christmas Day, and spent a few hours lounging in bed looking through his presents. He had received the usual Christmas pudding and woolly jumper from Mrs. Weasley, from Ron and Hermione he had received a Defence Against the Dark Arts book and some broomstick accessories, along with a short note.

Harry,

I know we've been fighting, but we wanted you to know we are still your friends. We know you're just upset about Sirius, but you really shouldn't dwell on his death. He wouldn't want you to be unhappy and block everyone out. Anyway, Merry Christmas, and we'll see you in the new year!

Love, Hermione and Ron.

Unsure how to react to the note, Harry put it aside and turned to his other gifts. Seamus and Dean had given him a roll of Quidditch posters, and Harry selected one of the Far North Taipans (an Australian team that he liked) that he hung on the wall beside his bed.

Neville had left him a small seedling that acted like a 'guard plant.' If it sensed someone that shouldn't be there, it would release a noxious gas that would temporarily subdue the intruder. Thinking he already had several dorm-mates that were more than capable of this, Harry smiled and placed it carefully on his bedside chest of drawers. From Hagrid, he had gotten some owl treats and rock cakes that were surprisingly good.

-

He lazed in bed reading his new book until lunch, which he decided he had better not skip. He dressed quickly and made his way to the Great Hall, arriving along with several teachers who all wished him a Merry Christmas. The table had a few more seats than usual. Some more teachers who had been at the castle in the previous week had left to spend time with family, but the ghosts and a few other people joined the group for Christmas lunch and dinner.

Harry took a seat next to McGonagall and wished her a Happy Christmas. She favoured him with a smile. "Happy Christmas, Mr. Potter. We missed you at breakfast this morning."

Just then, Dumbledore took a seat a few chairs down on the other side of the table. "I expect our remaining students both wished to spend time with their presents this morning, Minerva."

Harry blushed as McGonagall responded. "Mr. Malfoy managed to make it to breakfast."

"I'm sorry, Professo--"

"Not to worry, Harry." She smiled again. "It's quite alright. I'm not being so serious."

Harry returned her smile as the Malfoy and Snape took seats at the table. Very shortly, lunch was served and Harry tucked in. He wondered how Snape had reacted to the potions ingredients and made a point of remembering to ask Malfoy later. Lunch turned out to be quite a merry affair, and McGonagall even allowed Harry a small cup of mead. Harry narrowed his eyes as Snape poured Malfoy his third glass of wine, and Malfoy smirked gloatingly back.

After stuffing themselves and pulling several crackers, the group disbanded and Harry hung about in the entrance all for a while before going back up to the common room. He spent the time lazing in front of the fire, eventually attempting the last of his homework. He only had his potions essay left to do, but was having trouble with it.

After a while, he threw it to the side and began composing letters of thanks for the people who had sent him gifts.

After he had finished with the letters Harry stood and stretched. He had been thinking about the tunnel that led from the chamber to the Slytherin Common Room. He had a feeling that one of the other tunnels must lead to the Gryffindor Common room, and he wanted to find it. He spent an hour searching the walls around the stairs and fireplace, but found nothing, and eventually gave a sigh of defeat. He

had known it wouldn't be easy to find the entrance, if it was even there, but searching for a thing that he had no idea what it looked like, was still tedious.

Finally he gave up and walked over to the hearth where Salz had been curled up all day.

"Salzzz...?"

"Yesss, Harryyy?"

"Can you help me? I'm sssearching for sssomething."

"Sssearching for what?"

"I'm not entirely sure, but maybe a little sssnake."

-

"Why do you want another sssnake, Harry? Did I do sssomething wrong?"

Harry laughed. "Sssorry Sssalz, thatsss not what I mean. I'm looking for a picture or an engraving of a sssnake."

"I have not ssseen anything like that. I will sssee what isss around when I exxxplore."

"Thanksss Salzzz."

Harry retreated again to his favourite arm chair and sat thinking for a while about the Dark Arts book. Despite what he had told Dumbledore and Snape, he desperately wanted the book back, whether or not he was actually going to practice the magic. If it was in Snape's chambers like Malfoy had said, he would easily be able to get it back by going through the waterfall, or using the pendant. He was tempted to go straight away, but if he did it while only he and Malfoy were at the school, Snape would surely suspect that one of them had taken it. Harry couldn't risk Dumbledore finding out that he had the book again, and he didn't want to incur Snape's wrath either.

He decided to wait until the other students had returned, and after thinking a little longer, decided it would be best if he took it back at a time when Malfoy didn't know Snape's password. It was quite conceivable to Harry that Malfoy would take the book if anyone other than Snape had taken possession of it, and he had a feeling that if it disappeared from Snape's chambers that Malfoy would be a prime suspect. With this in mind, Harry resolved to steal the book at a time when Malfoy didn't know Snape's password. He wasn't sure, but he thought the Slytherin would rather sell him out than lose the trust of his godfather if he was accused of taking the book.

oOo

Harry left for Christmas dinner early and arrived before anyone else. He was hoping Malfoy would arrive before too many others so he could ask him what Snape had said about the potions ingredients. He was pleased when Malfoy arrived very shortly after him and silently took a seat across from him. Harry looked at him expectantly. "Well?"

"Well what, Potter?"

"How did he like it?"

"I haven't given it to him yet. We have this tradition where he always came over to Malfoy Manor for Christmas dinner when I was younger. Seeing as I'm here though, I'm going to go and see him after dinner."

"Oh, alright then. Well, I reckon he'll like it."

-

They lapsed into silence until all the teachers began to arrive, and Harry exchanged greetings with several of the professors. The Christmas feast passed slowly. Despite the festivities, Harry couldn't wait to get away. The teachers chatted merrily, and even Malfoy was engaged in an animated conversation with the Potions Master. Harry however, sat silently, eating slowly so that his mouth was always full and he could avoid an ongoing conversation with anyone. It was several hours later when, after the bonbons had been pulled and

toasts made, the teacher (some of whom were more than a little merry) disbanded in small groups, and Harry left as soon as he felt it was polite to do so. He watched as Malfoy left with Snape and felt an odd sense of jealousy as he thought about his own godfather.

Harry trudged back to Gryffindor Tower. He was halfway there when he had a sudden thought. Pulling the pendant from his shirt, he looked around to make sure no one was watching and apparated to his dormitory, where he threw open his trunk and grabbed his invisibility cloak, ignoring the very slight sense of draining energy he experienced.

He drew the cloak over him hurriedly and once again pulled out the pendant, which was still warm. Then, he apparated to Snape's chambers, thinking of a dark corner of the lounge.

Thankfully, neither Malfoy nor Snape was in the room. He wasn't sure if apparating using the pendant made any sound like normal apparition did. Harry could hear the two talking in a room through an archway, and from what Harry could see appeared to be a dining room.

Harry was about to walk through when Snape and Malfoy walked into the lounge, Snape carrying a square package wrapped in cloth. They were chatting casually as Snape poured two glasses of red wine, handing one to Malfoy. The Slytherin waited for Snape to take a seat before sitting on the end of the lounge closest to Snape's chair.

"Thank Merlin that is over," said Snape resting his head back and closing his eyes. "I detest the Christmas feast. Albus is far too cheerful on an everyday basis, let alone festive occasions."

Malfoy smirked and took another sip of wine. Harry moved closer to the pair.

"You could just not go, if you think it's so bad. I wouldn't mind just joining you here."

"Believe me, Albus and Minerva would never let me not attend." Snape leaned forward and grabbed the package he had earlier put on

the coffee table, and Harry smiled as Malfoy sat forward eagerly. He saw Snape smile at the Slytherin too. "Well, Merry Christmas Draco."

Harry felt another stab of jealousy. Snape obviously cared for Malfoy. Harry couldn't help but remember the Christmas he had spent with Sirius at Grimmauld Place, and he wished once again that Sirius was still alive.

"Thanks, Severus," said Malfoy, taking the package keenly and resting it on his lap. Harry watched as the boy carefully peeled back the layers of cloth, his eyes widening as he saw what was wrapped.

"It's beautiful!"

"And expensive. I will be extremely unimpressed if I ever find you are not looking after it."

-

Harry edged closer, trying to see what it was, but Malfoy answered the question for him. "It isn't a wizard's chess set?"

"Not the usual sort, no. The pieces don't move themselves."

"I've always wanted a nice set like this, it's so elegant," said Malfoy, running his fingers lightly over the board. What's it made of, stone obviously... but what sort?

"The dark pieces are obsidian; the red additions to those pieces are ruby. The white set is marble, with jade decoration."

"Wow... how much did this cost?"

"Draco, didn't anyone ever tell you it is rude to ask how much a gift cost?"

"I just meant that you shouldn't have spent this much on me, but I love it, I really do!"



“Well, you know I’m not short of money, Draco, so there is really no need to worry about cost.”

Malfoy carefully rewrapped the chess set after returning the pieces to the box they had come from.

“I got something for you too; you’re going to love it!”

Harry moved closer, eager to see Snape’s reaction to the basilisk parts. He walked slowly, careful not to make any noise with his footsteps or the swish of his cloak.

The Potions Master had leaned forward in his seat, and Malfoy was pulling a small box from his pocket.

“I shrunk it so it was easier to carry. Finite!” Malfoy ended the shrinking spell and the box was returned to its original size. Malfoy pushed the box across the low table. “Well, hurry up and open it!”

Harry thought Malfoy looked even more excited at the prospect of Snape opening the gift than he had with his own.

Harry waited with bated breath as Snape pulled the lid off of the box and took out the jar of blood. He frowned thoughtfully, inspecting the crimson liquid. “Blood? You bought me potions ingredients?” Snape became quite interested and finally put the jar on the table, pulling the box closer. “What kind of blood is it?”

Malfoy gave a smug smirk. “You’ll see. All these parts come from the same animal. I’m sure a master as skilled as yourself will be able to identify the animal.”

Taking it as a challenge, Snape returned the smirk and reached his hand into the box, pulling out the teeth.

“Fangs, of a dragon perhaps?” He looked at Malfoy for an answer, but the blonde boy merely waved his hand towards the box. This time, Snape pulled out the stone box of scales. “Hm... I still say dragon, perhaps a Welsh Green?”

-

Malfoy's smirk only widened as Snape reached his hand into the box for the last item; the diamond vial of basilisk venom.

Snape held the vial up to the light, the thoughtful frown back on his face. "Venom... there are several venomous dragons, but the Welsh Green is not one. Perhaps the African Avarix?"

Harry watched as Snape tilted the vial slightly, and the diamond scattered the light, creating sparkles of colour in the glass. Suddenly, Snape's eyes widened. "Diamond... Draco!"

He shot a sharp look at the boy before frantically grabbing at the other items, examining them again. Harry couldn't help but grin at the amazed look on Snape's face as he realised what the animal was. "Merlin..." breathed Snape. "Draco, this is basilisk venom... these are basilisk parts!"

"Finally! I thought you were never going to get it," replied Draco, leaning back with a grin on his face.

"How did you afford this! These ingredients are worth a small fortune!"

"My father is more than wealthy enough to afford it."

Snape snorted. "No one would willingly spend quite this much on anyone. How did you even find all these things? They are exceedingly rare. I myself have not seen venom before. Scales, yes, many years ago, but not this many. And a whole jar of blood!"

Snape looked at Malfoy expectantly, but Malfoy just smirked and said, "Let's say I have a contact with the experience to gain access to these ingredients."

"Who is it? Another Potions Master?"

"Oh no, this particular person is quite abysmal at potions."

Harry scowled. He wasn't that bad. He had gotten in to NEWT level, and was sitting somewhere in between an A and an E.

"Well who is it then? I would surely have heard about someone with this much stock."

Harry's heart suddenly started to beat faster. Malfoy had promised not to say anything about the chamber. Though the teachers already knew it was down there, he was fairly sure it wasn't a place they wanted students going.

"You wouldn't know this person. He doesn't want people to know he has this stuff, there's no way he'd be able to hang on to it if people found out. How about we play a game of chess?"

Snape frowned, clearly displeased, but acquiesced and helped Malfoy to set up the chess board. They chatted amicably and Harry very quickly lost interest in the game, choosing instead to look around Snape's quarters. It wasn't something he would go out of his way to do, but seeing as he was here...

Harry grinned and walked into the kitchen. It was fairly spacious, with wide marble countertops and a stone floor. It was dimly lit by wall sconces and there were a few pots and pans hanging along one wall. Looking over the counter tops, Harry could see the dining room and through the arch to his -

right, the corner of the lounge room closest to the entry door. Opposite the arch way on the other side of the dining room was a dark hallway.

Being careful not to make any noise, Harry slowly opened a kitchen cupboard, hoping it would not creak. Luckily, Snape kept his hinges well oiled (Like his hair, thought Harry) and it made no sound whatsoever. The cupboard was nearly bare. There was a biscuit tin and a jar of tea leaves beside a pottery dish full of knick-knacks. Closing that one and opening the next, Harry found a few jars of food; canned beans, some sauces, sugar and flour. There were also some jars of what looked like some kind of home-made goop. Harry

supposed if Snape was good at Potions that he might also like to cook.

Harry glanced around and saw salt and pepper shakers sitting on the table. Grinning mischievously, he crept over to the simple but elegant table and took the pepper grinder. Then, he went back to the kitchen and took down the jar of sugar. He set about mixing pepper into the sugar, just a little so it wasn't visually noticeable. Laughing quietly to himself, he set it back in the cupboard and was about to return the pepper when he thought better of it. There were many uses for pepper.

Checking to make sure that Snape and Malfoy were still engaged in the chess game, Harry slipped over to the dark hallway. It was fairly short, with five doors leading off of it. He tried the first and found that it was a bathroom. He only looked around quickly before going back to the kitchen and exchanging a jar he had found in the bathroom for one that look very similar to one of the goop jars in the kitchen.

The next door along was Snape's bedroom. There was a luxurious king size bed in the middle of the room with beautifully carved nightstands on either side. Harry crept over to the bed and gave the pillow with a dent in it a generous dusting of pepper.

The third door he tried was locked, and the fourth led down into a very nice potions lab. It was freakishly clean and over a hundred jars of ingredients lined the walls. Not really wanting to mess with anything in there, Harry retreated to the hallway and tried the last door. It opened up into a study with a huge messy desk in the centre.

He looked around briefly before noticing another door set in the wall. The office was a decent size, with a small fireplace along one wall and a large, messy desk in the middle of the room. There were a few paintings on the walls, one of which must have been a portrait, for it was currently empty.

Harry looked around again and saw that several book cases sat along the walls. If Snape did still have his book, it was sure to be in here. He walked over and inspected the closest book shelf, and found it was stacked mostly with editions of some potions periodical, and he

moved on to the next. This one was filled with potions material of all sorts; books, manuals and treatises. Moving along, he finally had some luck. This book case was stocked with books on, from what Harry could see, books dealing solely with the Dark Arts.

It truly was an interesting shelf. Harry would have like to have spent a few hours perusing the books, but instead he settled for scanning the shelf for the wide leather-bound book that was his. It was difficult, as the fair majority of books in the case were wide, leather-bound books of varying colours and thicknesses. After a good half hour, he ascertained that his book was not among these ones and moved on to the next book shelf. This one was filled with books on a multitude of subjects from -

charms to defence to herbology and arithmancy, as was the next. Harry had to admit that Snape had a not altogether meagre collection of books.

Huffing at not being able to find his book, Harry spun and found himself standing behind Snape's desk. His eyes lit up as he saw a large dark book sitting on top. Could it be? He strode forward and leaned over. Yes! It was definitely his. The light in the study was dim, but he could make out the faded gilt title. He scowled at the thought that Snape had been reading it.

He flipped through the pages briefly before arranging it as it had been before deciding it was time to walked over to the other door and opened it, and found he was standing very close to the waterfall painting. Thankfully Snape and Malfoy both had their backs turned to him and hadn't seen, or heard the door either. He closed it quietly and walked over to see what progress had been made in the game.

It appeared it was nearly over, and though Malfoy had taken his fair share of hostages, Snape was clearly winning. Harry glanced at his watch and was surprised to see that it was nearly midnight. Thinking it was time to go, Harry returned the pepper grinder to the dining room and was making his way over to the waterfall when he heard a triumphant Snape exclaim, "Checkmate!"

"Nooo!"cried Malfoy. "You always win!"

"That's because you don't think far enough ahead or pay attention to what I am doing. You are too impatient to win, and caught up in your own plans you fail to see mine. But no matter, like all things you will improve with practice."

Malfoy huffed. "I'm good at chess though, I can beat everyone I play, except for you."

Snape smirked. "One day, perhaps you will beat me too. When I am old and senile."

"Well you're already halfway there!" retorted Malfoy childishly.

"I am most certainly not old!" sniffed Snape, sticking his nose in the air and looking mock-sternly at the boy.

Malfoy grinned sheepishly and said, "Well, maybe not that old." Malfoy glanced at his watch. "Wow, it's nearly midnight. I should go. Thanks for the gift and the game, Severus."

"And thank you, also. I must say, those ingredients are quite the best gift I have received in many years. I still cannot believe you spent that much money."

"Oh, don't worry. I didn't spend that much at all, really. You'd actually be surprised. It was no more than I would have spent getting something else."

Snape clearly didn't believe him, but didn't press the issue. "Well, if you say so. Perhaps you would like to join me some time to experiment with the ingredients. Very few wizards ever get to use them, and especially not in the quantities we have here."

"That'd be great. Let me know when you plan on making a potion and I'll be here. Well, goodnight godfather."

-

Snape gave a small smile as Malfoy threw his cloak over his shoulders. "Goodnight, Draco."

oOo

Harry apparated to a spot in the dungeon corridor and waited for Malfoy to leave Snape's chambers. A minute later the portrait opened and the Slytherin stepped into the corridor, looking both ways before heading in Harry's direction, the chess board held firmly in his hands. Harry was tempted to leap out and scare him, but it really was a nice chess board and he didn't want it to be dropped and broken. Instead, he slowly pulled off the cloak as Malfoy approached, and the Slytherin eyed him suspiciously.

"What are you doing here Potter?"

"Waiting for you."

Malfoy didn't stop walking and Harry turned to catch him. "So did he like it?"

"Of course he liked it. I told you he would."

They walked in silence for a minute before Harry asked, "What's that you've got?"

"A chess board."

Malfoy suddenly stopped and spun to face Harry. "You were in there, weren't you? Don't even think about lying, Potter. I heard you, and I know exactly how you got in!"

Harry blinked, unsure of what to say. "Er... I wasn't spying or anything, and I wasn't in there long, just right towards the very end before you finished your game. I was looking for my book."

Malfoy still seemed suspicious, but accepted this and abruptly took off again.

“Just don’t steal it when I’m there. I don’t want Severus thinking it was me.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve thought it all out. I’m waiting for all the students to get back from holidays, and then you just have to tell me a time when you don’t know his password.”

Very shortly they reached the Slytherin common room. Harry slumped as Malfoy opened the portrait hole. He had felt alone all day and had been hoping Malfoy would want to go to the chamber for a while, but apparently not. He started to walk away when he heard Malfoy.

“Where are you going?”

Harry turned back, frowning, and shrugged. “Back to the common room.”

Malfoy looked at him appraisingly for a second before speaking. “You know, I’ve always liked wine but that cheap crap we had at the feast was pretty bad. I was planning on washing my mouth out -

with a good bottle of firewhisky, and you did say you’ve never tried it. I don’t think I can finish a whole bottle on my own.”

With that, Malfoy strode in the common room leaving Harry alone in the corridor. Harry deliberated for only a second before following the boy into the Slytherin domain. Malfoy had deposited the chess board on a low table in front of the fire and had taken a seat in a dark green arm chair. “Where’d you get the bottle from?” asked Harry.

“The Hogshead, when we were there the other day.”

“I didn’t see you buy it.”

Malfoy shrugged. “Guess you weren’t watching. Do you want some or not?”

Harry took a seat in the chair closest to Malfoy. “‘Spose. Got any glasses?”



Malfoy produced two stout glasses, poured a measure of golden-red liquid into each, and handed one to Harry.

Harry sniffed at the firewhisky before taking a sip. It tasted delicious and burned his throat on the way down, pooling in his stomach with a comforting warmth. He sighed happily and relaxed into the chair, feeling the warmth of the alcohol loosening his muscles and tangled thoughts. "That is good stuff."

"Indeed it is. The finest firewhisky on the market." Malfoy quickly drained the glass, and Harry followed suit. "Gets you real drunk real fast," said the blonde, pouring them both another glass.

It wasn't long before Harry started slurring his words and hiccupping. "You know, Ma'foy... yousooo lucky to hava godfather! I saw yous in there and he really cares abou' you. I neva got to know mine- all I did waz ge' 'im killed."

"Why'd you do tha'?"

"Coz i'm 'n idio'. 'N Dumberdo' neva tellz me enyfin'. If 'e didn' keep me in the dark all a time, it'd be right, bu' 'e treatz me lika li'l kid."

"Then whydja awayz do wat 'e sez?"

Harry snorted, forgoing his glass and taking a deep drink straight from the bottle, before handing it back to Malfoy who did the same. "Stuffed if I know... not gunna 'nemore though. Not gonna be 'is li'l pawn."

oOo

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Harry woke up late the next morning, slumped over in the green arm chair in the Slytherin Common Room. He turned his head to find Malfoy, who wasn't in his chair, but groaned and leaned forward when his head spun and his stomach heaved. "Uughhhh."

Moving slowly and using the furniture for support, Harry made his way to a bathroom he had visited several times the night before. He spent a good few minutes heaving his guts up before he stumbled over to the sink to wash his face. Glancing in the mirror he saw that he looked terrible. He had dark circles under his eyes and looked like he hadn't slept in a week.

He walked back into the Common Room and found Malfoy slumped over a bench, looking every bit as terrible as Harry felt. "I think we had a bit too much to drink last night."

Malfoy merely grunted.

"I'm going back to Gryffindor Tower to change my clothes. Guess I'll see ya at lunch."

Harry didn't wait for a reply (he was pretty sure there wasn't one coming) and left the dungeons, walking slowly back to his own common room. Once there, he ran the water in the shower hot and stood under it for a half-hour, hoping the soothing water would stop the pounding in his head.

When he was finally showered and dressed, he headed down to lunch grateful that he could eat, because he really needed something in his stomach.

He was one of the first there, and he slipped into his usual seat across from Hagrid, muttering a hello to the teachers. McGonagall rolled her eyes and gave him a stern look, muttering something about 'students and alcohol' and Hagrid gave him a sympathetic look. Harry frowned slightly at McGonagall, but then hid a grin when he saw that she, too, was looking a little the worse for wear.

Next to her, Snape looked his usual sour self. "Big night, Potter?" he sneered, an eyebrow raised.

"No sir," Harry mumbled.

"I would have expected a Gryffindor to have mastered the Hangover Relief potion by their 6th year, but we are talking about you, aren't we..."

At that point, Malfoy took his seat next to Snape, groaning as he lowered himself into his seat.

"Maybe you could teach it in class, sir? The Slytherins don't seem to know it either," suggested Harry, earning a glare from the Potions Master.

Gradually a few more teachers arrived, bringing the grand total of Boxing Day lunch attendees to eight.

"I think this might be all that is joining us today," said Dumbledore merrily, glancing around the nearly empty table. "An improvement over breakfast, at any rate." He clapped his hands and the table was filled with sandwiches and rolls. Harry grabbed a chicken salad roll and began to eat hungrily. The food felt great in his stomach and he began to feel less nauseous.

-

oOo

Harry approached his head of house two days after Christmas.

"Professor, I was wondering if I could talk to you about my classes."

"Of course, do you have a problem with one of them?"

"No, not at all. It's just that I'd like to take on another one this term."

McGonagall gave a small frown and Harry forged ahead before she gave him an outright no.

"I know it's late to be taking up another class, especially at NEWT level, but I really want to do this one. I've been studying over the Christmas break and I reckon I've nearly got the basics down, and Ma- someone said that's pretty much all that got done in OWL levels."

"I will have to think about it, Mr. Potter, and review the marks you have been getting in all of your classes. You have been doing well in transfiguration, but if you've been getting anything less than A's in any of your other classes, I don't think it would be a good idea. We'll have to make sure it fits into your timetable, as well. What class is it that you wanted to take up?"

"Ancient Runes and it does fit in my timetable. No clashes at all."

"Ancient Runes? An interesting choice, but you are already doing all the courses mandatory to become an auror, why choose that one?"

"I just have an interest in the subject, it's more for my own personal interest that I want to do it than as a possible career course. Although, if I do change my mind about being an auror it won't hurt to have a bigger range of NEWTs."

"I suppose that's true. Very well, I shall review your grades and let you know before school returns. Good day, Mr. Potter."

"Thank you Professor."

oOo

Hey guys, hope this chapter was alright. I'm probably only going to spend one more chapter on the holidays, and then it'll be back to school. I've written most of the next chapter already, so it should be up very soon. Please review! : )

## An Artful Adventure

Harry spent the rest of his holidays either flying or down in the chamber exploring and reading. Fairly often he was joined by Malfoy, and they would spend their time arguing and duelling, or having one on one Quidditch games. Although the Slytherin's superior attitude irked him, he had grown to tolerate it and he found he appreciated the boy's forthrightness. Malfoy didn't tiptoe around him like his friends did, and because he didn't care if he insulted Harry, had no problem with giving his opinion. Harry also appreciated Malfoy's honesty. There were a lot of things the Slytherin didn't tell him, but he also (as far as Harry could tell) never lied, even if he did like to exaggerate fact. Harry attributed this to the 'what happens in the chamber, stays in the chamber' rule.

oOo

On the second last day of the holidays, Harry and Malfoy stood in the deserted Entrance Hall, pondering over how to spend the day.

Harry was inspecting a painting of a small wood on a hill when he remembered. He turned to Malfoy. "I have an idea. Do you remember how when we went through that painting to get into Snape's room and the walls of the cave were weird? I want to see if we can get into the other paintings."

Malfoy looked doubtful. "It's highly unlikely. I've never heard of anyone getting into a painting before. I really don't think it's possible."

"Well we could put our hands through, so it must go somewhere, and I want to see where. I'll go by myself, but you could be missing out on something interesting..." Harry turned and started walking, but when he was nearly at the stairs, Malfoy caught up with him. "Fine, fine," he snapped. "I'll come, but let's not go that way. It takes too long. We'll go to Severus' rooms. His password is the same as it was on New Years, so we can get there much quicker."

Harry grinned and followed Malfoy down to the dungeons. After two minutes, they came to the door Harry recognised from when Snape had taken his book. Malfoy whispered the password and -

they entered the rooms, walking straight into the lounge. "You don't think the guy in the portrait will tell Snape he had visitors, do you?"

Malfoy paused, frowning. "I hope not. He'll just think it was me anyway."

"What if it tells him there was two of us, and that we didn't leave?"

"Well, we can either risk it or we can walk all the way up to girls' bathroom. Or the Slytherin common room. That's closer, but it'll still take time."

Harry shrugged. "No, I don't really want to waste time. Let's go." Harry stepped into the waterfall and moved over to make more room for Malfoy. As soon as they were dry, Harry reached out an arm and toughed his fingers to the wall of the cave. He felt the slight suctioning, static electricity feel. "This way?"

"I suppose. Come on, let's go. It's cold in here."

Harry edged sideways and pushed his shoulder into the wall. Waves rippled outwards, and the side of his body that was in the wall felt extremely strange. He held his breath and kept moving. Half way through, he suddenly felt a small tug, and he was spat out into a small, plainly furnished room. Malfoy followed after a moment and they looked around the little room. A chair sat in the middle of the room, and there was a door at the back.

"Potter! Look there – do you see?" Malfoy was pointing to Harry's left, sounding excited. Harry looked and gasped. There was a large window, and when he looked out, he was looking out into a study. He could see a desk, covered in papers and assorted items, and carpets of emerald green covered a stone floor. "I can't believe we're actually in a painting!"

“This is Snape’s private study in his rooms. This portrait we’re in – it’s of Phineas Nigellus, he used to be head of Slytherin, then after that he was headmaster.”

“So this must be the first painting along from the waterfall painting.”

“I guess. We must have to walk through the paintings like we would walk through the school, only it’ll be quicker because there space apart.”

“Except that some are landscapes. It might take longer to get across those.”

“Well, shall we move on? As interesting as this bare room is...”

Harry agreed, and they walked to the wall opposite the one they had entered from. Touching the wall, Harry again felt the same suction and tingling electricity feel. Pushing through, they found themselves in a sunny field, standing beside a broad oak tree. Draco frowned. “We’re still in Snape’s rooms. That’s his bedroom. It looks really big from in here.” Harry looked around. They were perfectly proportioned within the painting, but looking out was like looking into the room of a giant. Disinclined to hang around his Potions Masters’ bedroom, Harry tugged on Draco’s arm and pulled him across the field. It took them about five minutes to cross the field, and when they got to the fence on the other side, the bottoms of both of their robes were stuck with grass seeds. Harry -

clambered up onto one of the wooden stumps and swung over to the other side. As he did so, he felt the sensation of falling into another painting.

He was joined by Draco in a painting of a dark beach, covered in black silt. The sky was black and the sky was lightly spitting. An air of depression hung over the scene. The worst thing about the picture was the figure sitting on the rock. Harry recognised a mermaid from having seen them in the lake in fourth year. The mermaid was singing, or screaming – Harry couldn’t tell the difference. The screeches were shrill, loud and terribly off key, and Harry slapped his hands over his ears. He and Malfoy ran across the small room, and just before they

jumped straight through the wall, Harry caught a glimpse of a tidy little kitchen.

“That’s was terrible! I can’t believe Snape keeps a picture like that in his kitchen!”

Malfoy rubbed at his ears “It is pretty depressing. He must have cast a silencing charm on it, because you can’t hear those horrid screams when you’re in the kitchen.”

They continued on, passing through five more paintings before they reached a corridor.

“I never thought about how many paintings this school has, but it’s going to take us forever to get anywhere. There must be an easier way to get around.”

“I quite agree. We don’t want to get lost, either. As soon as we see someone we should ask them. I think where we are now is outside Snape’s chambers somewhere. From memory, this is the only painting in this corridor, so the next one should provide us with a different view.”

They stepped through the wall into another painting and Malfoy nodded in recognition. “Yes, I know where we are. This is just near the entrance to the Slytherin common room.”

They were in a forest scene, and the ground was covered in damp pine needles and black dirt. Looking up, Harry grabbed onto a low branch and pulled himself up.

Malfoy gave him a condescending look. “A bit old to be climbing trees aren’t we, Potter.”

“I was just wondering if we could get out of here another way. If we walk through portraits, it’ll take us ages, so what if we can go up?”

Malfoy dropped his condescending sneer and was soon sitting in the branches of the tree just beneath Harry. Climbing higher, Harry reached the height of the top of the frame and when he stuck his



hand up higher, felt the odd feeling again. "Malfoy! I can feel it, another painting! I think we can go this way."

Harry moved up a branch and clung to the trunk for support as he stuck his head up through the barrier. He grinned when his head came up through a smooth stone floor. From what he could see, he was in a classroom, he could see the legs of chairs and desks lined around him. Feeling around for a higher branch, he stepped onto it and got his hands above the floor. Then, he placed his hands on the stone and was relieved when they didn't sink back through. He pulled himself up through the stone and got to his knees, ducking out from under a desk. He looked around as Malfoy pulled himself up after. They were in a potions classroom, and Harry recognised the painting. It hung on the wall just outside their potions classroom; he walked past it for every lesson. Malfoy pulled himself -

up and Harry told him where he thought they were. Malfoy looked around. "You're right. Not much of a view from here though." Harry looked out through the frame and could see nothing but the stone wall on the other side of the dungeon corridor. "So if we continue up this way, we should come to the Great Hall, shouldn't we?"

"Should do." Malfoy suddenly grinned and walked over to a bubbling cauldron and looked in. Usually there was a young wizard here, stirring away at the cauldron. Many students had asked him what potion he was making, but he had always refused to say, playing silly guessing games with them and antagonising them with rude remarks about their intelligence and breeding. Harry joined him and stared down at the gluggy mess in the cauldron. "What is it? It looks familiar. One of the ones we've done this year, so it must be an Everlasting Elixir."

"You're right. I think it's an aging potion, y'know, the one that strengthens with time."

"Grapman's Solution!" shouted Harry, and Malfoy chuckled.

"Calm down, Potter. Yes, I think that's what it is too. I can't wait for potions; the wizard will be so disappointed that somebody finally worked out what potion he's been making."

Harry laughed. "I bet he cries! I can't wait to see the look on his face!"

"Shall we go and see what's going on in the Great Hall. It must be nearly time for lunch."

"Yeah... no wait! I want to do something first." Harry took out a quill and looked around the room. His eyes lit on the chalk board and he walked over to it. He picked up a piece of chalk and returned the quill to his pocket. Then, in capital letters he wrote HARRY POTTER on the chalk board.

"Are you crazy Potter! You can't do that!"

"Why not?" said Harry, surveying his work.

"Because you're defacing a centuries old portrait, that's why!"

"Oh, come on, Malfoy. No one will even notice. Besides, don't you like the idea of leaving something behind? Centuries from now, people will look at this painting and see our names there, if they look hard enough, anyway. Besides, it can be rubbed out." He held out the chalk to Malfoy, who narrowed his eyes and looked at it dubiously. "You know you want to," goaded Harry, and finally Malfoy took the chalk, and wrote his own name across the board beneath Harry's, in a neat, elegant script that made Harry's look like a three year old had written it. Harry grinned and slapped him on the back, earning a glare from the Slytherin. "Come on, now. I'm hungry and if I remember correctly, there's a painting of the first Hogwarts' banquet in the Great Hall."

Malfoy's eyes lit up at the thought of food, and they raced through paintings until they came to the Great Hall. The painting with the food was behind the head table, and Harry was about to step through to another portrait when he was yanked back by Malfoy. "What was that for?" he hissed, rubbing his neck where his robes had cut into it.

"We have to be careful. Remember there's that huge portrait of the some statue? It's lifesize, so where going to be nearly as big as it. If the teachers see us..."

-

Harry paled at the thought. "You're right. We'll have to be careful. I'll go first." He walked to the edge of the frame. The painting they were in now was of a ballroom, and there was no wall to go through, just an invisible barrier where the scene would suddenly change. Harry made sure none of the teachers were looking before he jumped through... and ran into a solid stone statue. "Shite!" he yelled, and a hand shot to his nose. Wincing, he scrambled to get behind the statue, just as he heard a voice say, "Did you hear that? I'm sure I just heard someone cursing."

Several voices agreed with the first, and Harry cringed. Malfoy would kill him if they were seen. Suddenly, he was joined by Malfoy, who jumped behind the statue with him. "What did you do Potter," he whispered angrily.

"I ran into the bloody statue and swore. They heard me."

Malfoy rolled his eyes with an exasperated glare. "At least they didn't see you. Come on, I'm starving."

Harry peeked around the statue to make sure the teachers were again engaged in conversation before he jumped through to the next painting. Luckily, neither he nor Malfoy were seen, and they finally reached the painting with food. So far, they hadn't run into anyone they could talk to, but this painting was filled with 6 witches, 5 wizards, four monks, two nuns, and a bunch of satyrs, all either standing around chatting or sitting at the table eating. They were greeted with cheers (it appeared this party was a little intoxicated) and ushered to the table. Harry grinned at Malfoy as they took seats, and they piled their plates with food, both accepting goblets of wine which were pressed into their hands by one of the obviously merry nuns. Malfoy leaned over and whispered in Harry's ear, "I thought nuns weren't supposed to drink!"

Harry grinned and whispered back, "Glad you came now? You could have been out there, sitting with teachers, instead of in here, surrounded by food, wine, and drunk nuns."

Malfoy laughed and lifted his goblet in a toast to Harry, who did the same.

The teacher's table had emptied dramatically by now, and the talk of the last few echoed loudly in the empty space as they conversed between bites of bread and potato salad. Harry choked on his potatoes when he heard his name, and turned his head to listen, seeing Malfoy do the same.

"Severus, Minerva," said Dumbledore, "have you any idea where our two students are? They've missed lunch every day for a week now."

McGonagall sighed. "I did talk to him, but he claims he simply isn't hungry, or that he's eaten in the kitchens. That boy is far too skinny for a boy his age."

"Well, if his relatives fed him properly he wouldn't be," responded Snape, a bite of malice in his voice.

Dumbledore sighed. "Severus, I know you do not think Harry should return to his relatives, but he is safe there. He is protected better there than he is even here."

"From the Dark Lord perhaps."

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There was silence for a moment before Dumbledore turned to Snape. "And where has Draco been? He too has been missing lunch."

Snape snorted. "He tells me he has been flying or doing homework, but I know for a fact that he already finished it all, and I haven't seen him on the Quidditch pitch. He has come to see me several evenings after dinner and he helped me in the lab for a few hours here and there, but apart from that I have no idea what he has been up to."

Dumbledore stroked his beard. I have noticed he and Harry appear to disappear at the same times. Perhaps they have been getting along a

little better?" Dumbledore's beard twitched as McGonagall and Snape laughed.

"I highly doubt it, Albus. The two have never gotten along, and I doubt they will start now. Draco blames Potter for his father being in prison and Potter hates him because his father is a Death Eater and he thinks Draco will go the same way."

"It's true," McGonagall agreed. "They are constantly at each other's throats in my class. I don't think it would be a good idea for them to form a friendship. Young Malfoy is too close to his father to be trusted."

Harry tuned out of the conversation and turned to Malfoy, who was frowning. "Do you really blame me for your father being in prison?"

Malfoy turned to him reluctantly. "Perhaps... I did, at first. But eventually I realised my father would have been there anyway. He is a Death Eater. You would do well to remember that, Potter. You can't trust me." Malfoy turned back to his food and Harry frowned.

"Do you want to be a Death Eater?"

Malfoy snorted into his food. "We've had this discussion."

"No, you've told me why you have to, but not whether or not you actually want to."

"You are so naive Potter. Even if I didn't want to, as I have already said, I can't just say no. My father would probably disown me, and I'd be killed for being a traitor. The Dark Lord expects the son of one of his most trusted and loyal followers to join the ranks."

"But if you don't want to..."

Malfoy slammed down his knife and fork and leaned over Harry, glaring menacingly. "Look Potter, I'm going to tell you this once more. You cannot trust me. I am not your friend. It doesn't matter what I want, but just so you know, I do want it. My whole life I have been

raised to want it, and come June, I will take the mark. Now, I do not want to talk about this again, and I don't expect you to bring it up."

Harry shoved his plate back and stood up, walking into the next picture. He wondered if Malfoy really did want it. He had certainly always said he supported Voldemort, but people often said things they didn't mean. Harry sighed and leaned against a tree, staring out as the last three teachers left -

the Great Hall. After a while, Malfoy entered the painting. "So, what now? Are we going to keep going?" He looked perfectly normal, as though he hadn't just yelled at Harry.

Not in the mood to fight, Harry shrugged and said, "If you want."

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He followed Malfoy into a gloomy forest that was still and silent. Faintly, Harry could hear a melancholy tune, twisting through the air and settling around him like a dream. "Do you hear that?" he asked Malfoy slowly, feeling distinctly sleepy.

"Yeah... It's beautiful... Such a magnificent voice..." Malfoy had turned, and was staring blankly off into the gloomy depths of the forest. He began walking, and Harry followed with no hesitation. Who was making such a beautiful sound? He had to find out. They stepped into the shadows and no sooner had he done so, then the voice became louder, it seemed as though a woman was singing right beside him. Malfoy had stopped and leaned down, resting against a tree. His eyes were closed and a peaceful smile played across his lips.

Harry tipped his head back, letting the peaceful sounds wash over him, and shortly he took a seat next to Malfoy. He felt he could sit forever and listen to that beautiful voice...

oOo

Harry awoke to hands shaking his shoulders and Malfoy's loud voice. He opened his eyes and sat up straight. It took him a moment to remember where he was, and as soon as he did he stood up. "I fell

asleep! Sorry! How long was I out for? I didn't realise I was that tired, but that beautiful voice..."

"I don't know how long you were out for, as I just woke up myself. I don't know what happened. It must have been some kind of spell or something, an enchantress or a pixie. Whatever it is, she's gone now, and I think we should go before she comes back."

"I agree. She did have a nice voice though." Harry looked out the frame of the painting. "And don't worry, it's still broad daylight outside. We can't have been asleep long at all."

Malfoy's face looked relieved, and after checking they both had their wands, they continued their exploration of the world of paintings.

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They continued on until they had left the Great Hall. In the Entrance Hall, they came upon a painting of a stairwell. "This might be an easy place to get up to the first floor," said Harry, and Malfoy agreed. They climbed the stairs, stopping after two levels and they could see a stone corridor lit with torches through a stone archway. When they went through the door however, they came into another painting, this one of a sandy desert. There was absolutely no wind, and they walked for about two minutes before stopping. In front of them rose a huge sand dune, and Harry turned to Draco. "How far do you think it goes? I don't fancy trekking across some desert, especially if it's a really big landscape."

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"I think we should go back and go up another level. I'm fairly certain this painting is outside my Arithmancy class, and it is a huge landscape. It'll take us ages to get across."

So they went back into the stairwell and climbed up another level, hoping they would find some other way to get back to the level below. This time, they came out into a portrait, and after greeting the occupant, they continued on through several more paintings. Eventually, they came to a meadow. Green grass was dotted with

daisies, and butterflies floated about in the air. They began walking across the meadow when Malfoy suddenly stopped. "Potter! Come back here. I think I've found a way to get down to the lower level, if you don't mind getting dirty. I must say, I don't fancy the idea, but we could be walking for ages and not find another way. We didn't ask those monks if there was an easier way to get around."

"What is it?" asked Harry, walking over to where Malfoy was bending over, looking at something on the ground.

"A rabbit or fox hole. It looks big enough to get through, and as soon as we get below the frame, we'll be in the painting below."

"I guess it's the first thing we've found so far, but what if we end up forty feet in the air. We'll break out necks."

"We can conjure a rope and tie it to that tree there. Then we can go down and see what's down there."

"Alright. Do you want to go first?"

"Okay." Malfoy conjured a rope, and Harry took one end and tied it to a tree. Malfoy threw the other end down the hole, where it curled on the ground of the shallow tunnel. Then, Malfoy put his hand down the hole and pushed lightly on the ground. Suddenly, the rope fell through and Malfoy jumped back, nearly over balancing. "Well, at least we know it goes somewhere." He got down on the ground, and slowly wiggled backwards until his feet, then his legs, and then his entire body were in the rabbit hole. "I can feel air down there. If it goes anywhere good I'll come back up and tell you. Then, sliding his hands back along the rope, Malfoy's head disappeared into the dirt. Harry waited, hoping Malfoy didn't fall. Sooner than he had expected, a hand stuck up through the dirt and beckoned him. Grinning with relief, Harry got on his belly and wiggled through the hole as Malfoy had done. As soon as his head passed the bottom of the frame, he was suddenly in another place. He twisted himself to look down, and saw Malfoy still sliding down the rope. The ground was about twenty metres below him, and he clung tightly to the rope as he lowered himself to the ground. It appeared they were in some kind of underground cave system, and the light seemed to be coming from



the walls themselves. "Minerals in the rock glow. That's what the light is," explained Malfoy. His voice echoed around the stalactites and stalagmites that surrounded them. They made their way around the rock sticking up from the ground and walked through the cool, damp cave. The air was surprisingly fresh, and Harry could see daylight up ahead. The cave opened up into a huge cavern that gave way to a sharp cliff. Both boys stood at the edge, looking down. Far below them, waves crashed mightily upon sharp rocks and Harry gulped. He reached out into the air, but couldn't feel anything. Walking over to a rock wall, he took hold of a root that was embedded in the clay and -

leaned out over the abyss. Stretching his arm out as far as he could go, he finally felt the tingling barrier. "Looks like we're going to have to jump, not too far though."

"Well, may as well do it now. There's nothing interesting here anyway."

They moved back ten metres from the edge of the drop and Harry could feel his heart racing. He was used to heights, but jumping off of a cliff was a different matter all together. He glanced at Malfoy who was looking a little sick himself. "Here goes nothing," murmured Harry, and he ran, taking a great leap into nothingness.

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He landed with a huge splash, grabbing onto his glasses as he sunk below the surface of the water, and his vision was obscured by bubbles and white water as Malfoy plunged in next to him. They swam upwards, Harry choking as salty water entered his mouth.

"Ugh!" spluttered Malfoy, spitting water from his mouth as Harry rubbed at his stinging eyes. "I hate the beach!"

Harry laughed and set out for the shore. "I love it! It's been years since I've been." He turned and floated leisurely on his back, loving the feel of the warm water. "Let's swim here for a while."

"No! I hate the sand. It gets absolutely everywhere."

“Well then stay in the water. There’s no need to go in the sand.” Harry pulled off his shoes, socks and outer robes and flung them up onto the beach.

Malfoy huffed and complained, but when Harry ignored him, he too reclined in the water closing his eyes against the bright sun. “You know, I don’t think I’ve been to the beach in ages either. Mother used to take me when I was little and we went abroad.”

“Hm. I’ve only ever been once, and that was because Aunt Petunia couldn’t find a baby-sitter. Dudley was furious. It was fun though.”

They floated for an hour in the warm water before Harry trudged up onto the beach. The sand was a beautiful white and palm trees were dotted along the dunes. He sprawled out on the smooth sand, letting the sun dry him. Minutes later, Malfoy followed him up, stepping carefully to avoid getting too much sand on his feet. Harry sat up and grinned at Malfoy. “Let’s make a sandcastle.”

“We aren’t children, Potter, and I’ll get sand all over me.”

“So what, you can wash it off later.” After five minutes of pleading, Malfoy finally settled himself reluctantly on the sand. Together, they pushed a mound of sand together, creating a moat around it, and then began to pat it smooth and mould it in to shape. Harry collected shells to decorate it, and Malfoy found a twig and a green leaf to use as a flag, which he stuck on the highest point of the castle. “Slytherin green,” he commented proudly, and Harry rolled his eyes. Standing back, they surveyed their work. It was lumpy, and in no way realistic, but Harry smiled.

“Well,” drawled Malfoy, “It’s no Hogwarts, but I suppose it will do.”

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Harry laughed, and Malfoy joined in, collapsing to the sand in a fit of laughter.

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After a while, they dressed and left the sandy beach. They ended up in a corn field, and both munched on corn as they pushed through the plants, which stood tall above their heads. The next picture held a muddy swamp, and they sloshed through, muddying their robes before entering another portrait. Eventually, they came to a portrait of three fairies, who laughed prettily and commented on their dirty clothes and faces. Harry looked at Malfoy who was scowling and glaring at Harry. Malfoy looked dreadful; he had leaves in his hair, the hems of his robes were drenched and torn, and what could be seen of his shoes and legs was covered in a thick grey gelatinous mud. The same mud covered his hands and was streaked heavily across his face, and Harry couldn't help but laugh. "Shut your mouth, Potter. You're no sight yourself!" The boy turned and stormed from the portrait, and Harry followed with tears of mirth running down his cheeks.

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"We should start heading back now. I want to shower before dinner."

"As do I. Unfortunately, I have absolutely no idea where we are or what time it is," replied Malfoy.

"Well, soon as we see someone we can ask. The students don't arrive until five, and it surely can't be that time yet." Looking out of the frame of the portrait they were in however, Harry wasn't sure. The shadows cast on the wall were long, and the light was dim, as if from a setting sun. Malfoy seemed to be thinking the same. We really should hurry. It's going to take us an age to get back."

Happily complying, Harry followed Malfoy along the bridge they were walking on. When they got near the end, however, they found the stone had given way."

Harry peered over the edge. It was only a few metres to the ground. "Looks like we'll have to jump again." Feeling much less fearful than the last time they had jumped, Harry strode back just a few feet and took a running leap.

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He landed hard, and went sprawling, his glasses falling from his face and shattering on rock. He heard a thump next to him, and then Malfoy's drawling voice. "Very elegant Potter."

Hands grasped the back of his robes and pulled him up. "I lost my glasses." He squinted at the ground where he thought they had fallen, but stopped when Malfoy tisked and muttered a summoning charm. "You act so much like a muggle sometimes, Potter. It defies thinking. Reparo. Here you go. Do try not to lose them again."

Harry muttered thanks and stuffed his glasses back onto his face, taking in the scene. They were standing on a rocky plateau, and steam was issuing up from cracks in the rocks. The temperature of the air was cool, but when the wind blew, it would bring with it warm currents of air, and the lingering scent of sulphur.

They made their way carefully, picking their way around jagged stumps of rock.

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"Potter, look here!"

"What is it?"

"A nest. I think they're dragon eggs!"

Harry hurried over to Malfoy and gasped when he saw it. A large circle of straw and leaves lay nestled between a circle of rocks, about five metres across. Right in the centre was a clutch of head-sized, brown, speckled eggs, and Harry recognised them instantly as dragon eggs.

"I get the sudden feeling we shouldn't hang around here too long," whispered Harry, scanning the skies.

He spoke too late however, as from behind them they heard a loud screech and the heavy whoosh of wings. Harry and Malfoy stared at each other in terror and instantly took off running, as fast as they

could around and over steam vents and rocks. They had not gotten far when a dark shadow swept over them, and they skidded to a halt as a huge black monstrosity set down in front of them, blocking their escape. The beast was angry, its long neck weaving back and forth low to the ground as it let out fearsome screeches. Suddenly, it reared back, and Harry jerked Malfoy down behind a sturdy rock. They were just in time, for no sooner had they done so, then a fiery wave of heat washed over the top of the rock. They huddled down, and when the flame abated, they made a mad dash for a larger rock that was off to the side. A roar sounded after them, and Harry let out a particularly unmanly squeak. This reminded him all too much of the Tri-wizard tournament, only this time, he couldn't summon his broom.

Beside him, Malfoy was breathing heavily. "We need to get past it, and then we can get into the next painting."

"How far are we going to have to go though? We can't outrun that thing!"

"Well we can't stay here, can we?"

Slowly, Malfoy began to belly crawl, keeping low behind a ledge of rock. He reached the next rock big enough to hide behind, and waited for Harry.

Suddenly, the dragon appeared, nostrils smoking, around their previous rock. Unfortunately, they were no longer hidden, and the dragon let out a roar of rage when it saw them. Harry screamed at the same time as Malfoy, and they scrambled backwards. The dragon advanced and they walked backwards, tripping over rocks. Suddenly, Harry ran into something, and turned. He found himself pushing against an invisible barrier that felt rough to the touch. It was the fabric of the painting! Beside him, Malfoy was scratching frantically, then pushing with all his might against the canvas. Harry turned back to face the dragon, which was rearing up on its hind legs, preparing to attack. He heard a small whimper, but when he turned, Malfoy had disappeared. "Malfoy?! Malfoy! Where'd you go?" yelled Harry, starting to panic.

At that moment, the dragon lunged forward, and Harry screamed, pushing himself back as if the action would take him out of reach of the dragon's sharp teeth. Expecting the fangs to pierce him at any moment, he was surprised to find himself falling, and suddenly his head and back impacted with a hard stone floor. He groaned and opened his eyes to see he was lying on the floor, and he could see -

an angry dragon roaring in a painting above him. Realization dawned on him and he began to laugh hysterically. They had fallen out of the painting! He turned his head and saw Malfoy, who was looking a little hysterical himself. The boy was pulling himself to his feet, and Harry did the same, using Malfoy as leverage.

For a second they looked at each other, then back at the painting of the obviously furious dragon. Then they burst into laughter, and ran to the end of the corridor, tumbling down the stairs into the Entrance Hall. "Shite, Potter! I thought we were going to die! And then I thought you were going to die, and you didn't even hear me calling you when I fell out!"

Harry fought for breath. "So sorry, Malfoy, but I was a little preoccupied with the dragon."

They leaned against the wall, calming their breathing, occasionally breaking out into little laugh bouts of nervous laughter. Suddenly, they shot up straight as the sound of doors opening and a thousand voices filled their ears. They turned to see a thousand students pouring into the Entrance Hall, led by McGonagall and Snape.

Harry exchanged Malfoy's frown. "I thought everyone didn't get back till tomorrow?"

"Me too. I'm certain they weren't supposed to. I cannot believe my friends are going to see me in this state. I doubt they'll even recognise me."

Harry cringed as he recalled his and Malfoy's appearance. They must look even worse now than they had when they had come across the fairies.

At that point, the students and teachers at the front noticed them, and the excited chatter died down as they were eyed warily. Snape and McGonagall wore matching frowns, both trying to determine who stood covered in mud and grime.

It was Pansy, standing at the front of the crowd who tentatively broke the silence. "Draco?" she asked hesitantly.

Malfoy grimaced and replied. "Hello, Pansy."

McGonagall gasped, and Snape had a strange look of relief on his face.

"Mr. Malfoy! Is that Mr. Potter with you?"

Malfoy nodded as Harry shuffled his feet and mumble, "lo, Professor." to McGonagall.

Snape stepped forward as whispers and giggles broke out among the students, the ones at the back straining to see over the crowd at what was holding everyone up.

"Where on earth have the two of you been?" hissed Snape in a deadly whisper. "Do you have any- any idea the trouble you have caused?"

Harry averted his gaze, and Malfoy just shuffled his feet.

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McGonagall took up the reins. "The teachers have been out looking for you since last night! We thought..." she stopped, glancing at Malfoy, then at Harry and took a deep breath. She must have suspected Malfoy of having something to do with me disappearing, thought Harry.

Snape stepped forward. "You will both go to my office NOW! You will wait there until Professor McGonagall and I come down there, and we will be having a serious talk. You do not just disappear from school grounds without telling anybody that you plan on leaving!" Snape was

clearly furious, and Harry followed Malfoy out of the Entrance Hall at a quick pace, leaving behind the excited whispers and giggles of the other students.

Malfoy groaned. "We are in so much trouble. Did you see him? He was practically rabid! He'll skin us alive and use us as potions ingredients."

Harry was inclined to agree, but he was confused. "I don't get it though, I was sure we had another day till everyone came back, and did you hear what McGonagall said, about the teachers looking for us since last night?"

Malfoy snorted. "Yes. Did you see the look she gave me? They were probably all thinking I'd dragged you off to You-Know-Who."

"I know, sorry about that. Still, how can they have been looking for us since last night? We just saw them at breakfast this morning."

"And they didn't seem too fussed at lunch. They were talking about us, but they didn't seem worried, they were joking in fact."

They walked in silence for a while, coming to Snape's office. Neither was willing to risk Snape's wrath by dirtying the chairs, so they remained standing, fidgeting nervously while they waited for their heads of house to come and yell at them. While he was waiting, a thought dawned on Harry. "You don't think... you know that painting, the one where we both fell asleep? What if we slept longer than we thought? What if we slept for a whole day!?"

"I was just thinking that, actually. I did feel quite rested when I woke, but I thought that was just because of that weird voice. Besides, I've never slept for a whole day before. Still, I can't think of any other explanation."

"Well, if we ever go back into the portrait world, I think maybe we should avoid that particular frame."

Malfoy turned to Harry, and said in a scolding tone, "Are you crazy, Potter? There is absolutely no way we are doing that again. Who



knows what could have happened? What if we never woke up? We nearly died!"

"But we didn't. We know how to get out now, just push against the canvas. Besides, hardly any of the paintings are dangerous like that."

"You truly are stupid beyond belief Potter. We-" Malfoy shut his mouth when the door banged open and Snape strode into the room, McGonagall following. Her mouth was set in a rigid line, and she -

appeared as angry as Harry had ever seen her. Much to his dismay, Dumbledore entered after them, a serious expression on his normally friendly face.

Snape held the chair behind his desk out for McGonagall and levitated the two in front of the desk around for himself and Dumbledore. Harry observed his shoes while the three teachers arranged themselves. He looked up when he heard a throat being cleared.

"Well?" snapped Snape. Harry glanced at Malfoy. "Don't look at him Potter. One of you is going to tell us where the two of you disappeared off to, and why in God's name you are covered in filth!"

"This is extremely serious, Harry, Draco," intoned Dumbledore. "I cannot begin to understand how, in the current political climate, the two of you would leave the castle grounds."

Harry shuffled and cleared his throat. "We er... didn't mean to Professors. We just got lost."

"Got lost, Mr. Potter? I find it most difficult to believe that two boys who have been at this school for six and a half years simply got lost! Where exactly did you get lost?"

"In the Forbidden Forest," said Malfoy quickly. "We were out on the Quidditch pitch. I had a snitch, and we were chasing it, but it got away. We chased it into the forest and that's when we got lost."

Snape thumped the table. "Draco, this is no time for lies. I expect you to tell the truth. We checked to see if you were out flying, and both of your brooms were in your respective dormitories."

Malfoy stuttered and Harry took over the story. "Please sir, he isn't lying. We weren't on our brooms. Otherwise... otherwise we would have just been able to fly up above the trees and back to the castle. You see, the snitch was one of those practice ones that flies just a few feet above the ground. That's why it didn't stay on the pitch. We didn't realise we had gone so far into the forest, but eventually we lost it, and we couldn't find the way back either." Harry finished it all in one breath of air and hoped desperately that the teachers believed them. Currently, they seemed to be conversing silently with each other, trying to gauge whether it was the truth or not. Snape looked Harry straight in the eye, and Harry ducked his head, remembering all too clearly how substandard his Occlumency skills were. Snape spoke. "Is that true, Draco? Is Potter telling the truth?"

"Yes sir." Harry could hear the quiver in the boy's voice. "We really didn't mean to get lost. It was just an accident. We eventually found our way back, in fact we'd only just gotten back when you found us."

The teachers exchanged another look before Dumbledore stood. "I hope you both understand the seriousness of what you have done. I understand that it may have been an accident, but you should have thought more carefully about your actions. The forest is forbidden for a reason, and you should not have left the safety of the school grounds for a toy." Harry and Malfoy hung their heads as Dumbledore continued.

"Severus, Minerva, I will leave you to hand out punishment as you see fit." With that, Dumbledore exited the room and Harry looked up into the angry faces of his teachers.

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Snape stood. "I would suggest the two of you go and wait outside whilst we discuss your punishment. I do not want to hear a word between you, and you are not to talk to anyone who might walk past. Understood?"

Harry nodded and saw Malfoy do the same. Then he turned and opened the office door, stepping out into the chilly dungeon corridor. His robes were damp with mud and water, and he shivered. Malfoy shut the door quietly and stood next to Harry silently.

In the five minutes nervous wait for the door to reopen, they received odd glances from the Slytherins who were making their way up to dinner. No one tried to talk to Harry, but Malfoy was forced to shake his head at the students who tried to talk to him. Finally, Snape beckoned them back into his office, and Harry walked back in with trepidation.

“We have decided you will each receive a weeks worth of detention. In addition, you will each receive a deduction of sixty points from each of your houses.”

Harry started to protest, but Snape held up his hand. “Mr. Potter, you are in no place to discuss this. You seem to have no conception of the seriousness of what you have done if you even think you can argue a defence.”

McGonagall stepped forward. “In addition, you are both suspended from Quidditch until further notice.”

This time, Draco began to protest along with Harry, but they were again cut off.

“That is the end of the discussion. You will eat here, and then you will both go straight to your dormitories and get washed up.” McGonagall conjured a plate of decidedly dry sandwiches and a pitcher of cold water. With that, she and Snape left the room with a final glare at the two boys.

There was a strained silence in the room as the door shut behind the professors. After a moment, Malfoy turned to face Harry, and despite the mud coating the boy’s face, Harry could tell he was angry. “Well, thank you just sooo much Potter. I cannot believe I let you drag me along on your ridiculous pursuit. Now I have to miss out on Quidditch, until further notice. That’s bound to be ages! Plus, all those points

means Slytherin won't be in the lead for the House Cup anymore! You are such a bloody idiot Gryffindor!" He had started out with a sarcastic drawl, but by the end he was practically yelling.

"You made the choice to come Malfoy. I didn't twist your arm. Anyway, it isn't my fault we slept through a whole day!"

Malfoy gave Harry a look of utmost loathing and grabbed a sandwich, filling a glass with water from the jug. He didn't speak another word to Harry the entire time, and Harry gladly ignored him back. Eventually Malfoy left, slamming the door behind him. Not wanting to be in Snape's office alone, Harry grabbed the last sandwich and left, making his way up to the Great Hall. Fortunately for Malfoy, they were already in the dungeons. Harry on the other hand, would have to go through the castle, including the Great Hall, and there was most likely still a fair few people left there from dinner. He passed a few Slytherins who sniggered quietly, but the worst part came when he got to the Great Hall. He was halfway across by the time anyone noticed him, but when they did the Hall -

went silent for an instant before whispers broke out. Harry kept his eyes to the ground and made for the doors on the other side, trying to ignore the faces turned his way.

After what seemed ages, he reached the doors and thankfully ducked around the corner, heading for the staircase. At the base, he heard someone call his name and turned to see Ron and Hermione hurrying towards him.

"Harry!" squealed Hermione. "What on earth happened to you? You look terrible!"

"Yeah, mate. I can hardly tell it's you under all that mud, and what were you doing with Malfoy?"

Harry sighed and beckoned for the two to follow him, repeating the lie he and Malfoy had told in Snape's office.

“Why were you even hanging out with that Slytherin scum, Harry? What if he was just tricking you or something to get you off the school grounds?”

“Ron, don’t be ridiculous. Besides, what was I supposed to do all holidays, sit around by myself? Malfoy was the only other student here and we were both bored. It’s not a big deal.”

Ron looked ready to pursue the matter, but thankfully Hermione changed the subject. “So how were your holidays, apart from that? I wish you could have been at the Burrow with us, but, well... you know.”

“I wish I’d been there too, Hermione. I missed you guys when we were fighting.”

“Me too mate. Nice pressie by the way, I love ‘em!”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “He barely took them off, Harry. First he was cold, then he was going to play Quidditch, then more Quidditch...”

Harry laughed as Ron’s face turned red. The trio continued up to the common room, chatting about the holidays, and once they got there Harry excused himself to have a shower. He stood under the scalding water watching as the mud turned the water a dark brown. After half an hour, he finally managed to scrub his hair and body clean, and returned to his dorm, gratefully falling into bed. He was exhausted from the adventure in the paintings, and though the episode with the dragon had scared the living hell out of him, all he could think of as he fell asleep was that he couldn’t wait to go back.

Hey everyone... hope everyone who’s reading is enjoying.

Please review... I’m on my knees begging here...

## Thirty Points Apiece

The next day, Harry walked down to the Great Hall for breakfast. He sat, noticing that many students were commenting on the loss of points from both Gryffindor and Slytherin. He cringed, shooting an apologetic look at his housemates as he explained to Hermione and his dormitory buddies.

"I've got detention for a week, too." He left out the part about being banned from Quidditch, as he thought Ron might choke on his breakfast. It was entirely too harsh a punishment, he thought, for disappearing for a day.

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Harry couldn't wait for his first class of Ancient Runes. The only problem was that he had to wait all day, runes being the very last class. First up, he had Transfiguration, and they were moving on to another topic that Harry was quite interested in – Human to animal transfigurations. This was mostly a theoretical subject as past students had been horribly deformed by spells gone wrong when practicing with partners. The topic also covered animagi, which was the part Harry was most interested in. He had forgotten all about the book he had found in the chamber and made a point of reminding himself to look at it.

"This is a particularly trying subject," said McGonagall. "I do not want anyone transfiguring noses into beaks or skin into scales as a practical joke. We shall only be practicing one at a time so that I can monitor all spells attempted. This topic will only run for a few weeks before we move on to the next topic. What we learn this year will of course be a precursor to more complicated transfigurations in your seventh year." She gave the class a stern look, her lips pursed, before lecturing them on the theory behind minor changes to facial structure.

oOo

After Transfiguration, Harry and Hermione left for potions, arriving with others from transfiguration to find the door locked and the rest of

the class waiting outside. Harry, Hermione and Seamus joined Terry and Hannah, leaning against the damp dungeon wall. The class had already grown smaller. Apparently, Snape had been less than pleased with Millicent's performance in the class and they were now one Slytherin down.

Suddenly he heard a jeering voice to his right.

"No, that's not what it is! And you in NEWT levels, too! I must say, the standards in this school have certainly dropped since I was here, but then again, I Serenius Mobrey was a talented student."

Harry turned to see Goyle and Pansy conversing with the picture of the student brewer, when he remembered that he now knew what the potion was. Grinning victoriously, he moved over with the rest of the class, who were observing the guessing game between the Slytherins and the brewer. He exchanged a look with Malfoy, who scowled at him, obviously still upset about being banned from Quidditch.

Harry pushed to the front of the small crowd just as Malfoy got there. Malfoy said in a smug tone, "So, Mobrey, might I have a guess at what the potion might be?"

Mobrey eyed Malfoy appraisingly, then grinned cheerfully. "I suppose, but the odds of you getting it are slim to none, I'd say. The last person to guess what I've been brewing was your own Potions Master."

"What did he guess?" asked Hannah.

"Shrinking Solution."

"Is that what it is now?" asked Terry.

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"Of course not! I began a new brew once the answer had been guessed. Why would I make the same thing twice? How utterly ridiculous!"

“So you’ve been brewing the same potion for what, twenty years or something? Isn’t that kind of ridiculous?” retorted Terry

Mobrey stuck his nose in the air. “I do other things with my time. Besides, if I kept changing it then no one would ever get it, would they?” The young man focussed on Malfoy. “Now, young chap, what was your guess?”

Malfoy threw a glance at Harry and smirked. “What do you think, Potter? An Everlasting Elixir perhaps?” Harry was surprised Malfoy was letting him in on it, but pleased.

“I think you might be right there, Malfoy,” he replied in a musing kind of voice, as though thinking it over. “Perhaps some kind of aging potion?”

“Hmm... yes, the one that strengthens with time.”

Then they both turned to the brewer and said together; “Grapman’s Solution?”

Serenius Mobrey’s eyes were wide, a comical expression of shock on his young, boyish face. “How...how?” he stuttered as Harry and Malfoy chuckled lightly.

“You couldn’t possibly have known that!” he huffed.

“How did you know, Harry?” asked Hermione.

“I think we’d all like to know that,” supplied Pansy, directing this at Malfoy who was looking atrociously smug, and replied with a shrug.

“Well,” sneered a cool voice from behind them. “It appears I have actually taught you something this year after all. Congratulations Draco, Mr. Potter. Thirty points apiece.”

Harry stared open mouthed at the Potions Master. Snape had just awarded him points?



“Oh, close your mouth, Potter. I’ve no interest in learning what you had for breakfast.” He turned away to unlock the classroom door. “It is tradition that whoever guesses the potion Mr. Mobrey is brewing gets sixty points for his or her house. Seeing as you guessed between you, it’s thirty each.”

“Well, it only took over fifteen years for someone to guess. Not bad in my opinion,” said Mobrey haughtily, as though offended that someone had guessed. Suddenly a look of boyish enthusiasm and trickery crossed his face and he gave them all a brilliant smile.

The class watched as he performed an ‘Evanesco’ on the contents of the cauldron. “Let’s see how long it takes you all this time.” With that, he turned to the table behind him and started chopping ingredients, looking suspiciously over his shoulder and edging closer to shield the table from view.

Members of the class rolled their eyes before congratulating either Harry or Malfoy and going in to the classroom.

-

Harry moved closer to the painting, straining to see the dark blackboard. Beside him, Malfoy was doing the same. He could just make out dusty white smears on the board where his and Malfoy’s names had been, the only sign left of their trip into the world of paintings. Mobrey must have rubbed them out at some stage, for there was now a list of Potions ingredients listed on the board. “Next time, we’ll have to leave our mark on something not so easy to destroy.”

His only response was a disbelieving snort from Malfoy as he stalked into the classroom.

oOo

At lunch Seamus was relaying to the other Gryffindors how Harry had guessed the potion.

“Good on ya, mate!” said Ron.

“Yeah well, at least I’ve earned back half the points I lost yesterday.”

“Don’t worry about it. McGonagall’s a sour old woman and Snape’s always had it in for you. You didn’t deserve to get all those points taken off if you ask me.” His other friends nodded their heads in agreement, though Hermione scowled at Ron’s characterisation of their head of house who was, generally a very fair and friendly teacher.

“We’ll win it all back in Quidditch points, anyway,” said Ron. Harry was about to tell them that he had been banned from Quidditch indefinitely, but he was saved from doing so by the bell for class. Feeling somewhat relieved, Harry trudged off to herbology with Neville, Seamus and Dean.

Walking to the greenhouse, Harry was reminded of the gift from Neville. “By the way Nev, thanks for the plant. I can always count on you for something different.”

“Have you named it yet, Harry? Plants flourish and perform better with emotional care you know.”

“Well, I was thinking that Ron or Seamus would be quite fitting, but it might get a bit confusing.”

Neville chortled, and Harry chuckled, but Dean and Seamus just looked on with confusion on their faces.

“I guess I’ll have to think about it a bit more.”

oOo

After herbology, a spare, lunch and another spare, it was finally time for his first ancient runes lesson. Harry had been hoping he would be in Hermione’s class, but unfortunately she had Care of Magical Creatures in this timeslot. Ancient Runes was an obscure subject, but it was reasonably popular because it could be used in many fields from healing to spell making. Because of this, there were two classes

so that anyone with a clash could still do it. This also had the added benefit of making the class reasonably small.

He arrived at the class to find he was one of the first there, and took a seat at the back to watch the other students arrive. He wondered if Malfoy was in this class. It wasn't as if they were friends, but at least he would know someone. Eventually, everyone arrived. Malfoy was indeed in the class, -

along with Blaise Zabini. The class was mostly made up of Ravenclaws however, and no Hufflepuffs. Harry himself was the only Gryffindor, probably because most of the Gryffindors in his year had elected to do Care of Magical Creatures.

Professor Babbling was a scholarly-looking middle aged witch with shoulder length brown hair and a kind, round face. "Since we have a new student in the class, I will be giving a brief overview of what we'll be doing this year before we continue on with the new topic." She turned to the board and wrote as she spoke. "We will be starting this term with intermediate interpreting of the basic Futhark Alphabet. This will of course continue as we focus on particular subjects throughout the year. The second topic will cover logograms. After a few weeks we will look at the Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs before moving on to a very basic look at different versions of the runic alphabet. These include Gothic Runes, Anglo-Saxon Futhork, Medieval Futhork, etcetera. Following that, we will discuss the fields in which runes are useful to us today. Though their use has largely died out, those who still know them are found to be more powerful in their protection spells, more successful in their healing, more correct in their divination. The list goes on, but no matter what you choose as your career, whether it be spellmaker, medi-wizard, potions master, auror or artist, you will find a use for ancient runes. The final topic will be again studying intermediate interpreting, with a research project of your own where you will find and decipher a large piece of text. I would hope all of you have Spellman's Syllabary by now. Mr. Potter, you will have to buy these books or you will find it very difficult to get on in this class. Some sort of rune dictionary is always helpful, and the recommended text for this year is Advanced Rune Translation."

Harry thoroughly enjoyed the class. He understood a little from his reading over the holidays, but he still had a lot of catching up to do. Even so, he was highly interested in the topic, and because of this he found it was easy to pay attention and pick things up.

oOo

This term, Harry had Occlumency lesson on Monday and Thursday nights, and Saturday mornings. He had Quidditch practices on Saturday afternoons. He was not looking forward to telling his team he had been banned, but he knew they had to start training up their reserve seeker a bit more in case McGonagall made him miss the first match.

Ginny was of course the reserve seeker, and their reserve chaser to take her place would be Seamus. He told Seamus that night that he would be playing in Gryffindor's first match if his ban wasn't lifted.

"I can't believe McGonagall banned you! She loves to win! Bit of a harsh punishment I reckon, taking points, detentions and banning you from Quidditch."

That then reminded Harry that he was nearly late for his first detention and he trudged down to McGonagall's office, wondering what was in store for him. He knocked on the door and heard her call out. "Enter!"

He pushed open the door and walked over to stand in front of the professor's desk. "I'm here for detention, professor."

"Good. Mr. Malfoy will be joining us shortly and you will be writing lines for this evening."

-

Harry didn't think that was so bad and he took a seat, pulling quill and parchment from his bag.

That night, he spent an hour writing 'I will not leave school grounds without permission' before McGonagall mercifully let them go.

oOo

Wednesday morning as Harry was sitting quietly eating, Hermione let out a noise of anger.

“What is it?” asked Harry. She shoved the paper at Harry, and Ron leaned over his shoulder to read it too. The headline read ‘Lucius Malfoy Released from Azkaban’ and below that, in slightly smaller writing, ‘By Order of the Minister.’

Harry straightened the paper angrily, as Ron read part of the article out loud.

“Lucius Malfoy has been cleared of all charges filed against him. The Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge declared Mr. Malfoy free after reviewing the facts of the case in a trial last Monday evening. Mr. Malfoy was cleared of being a Death Eater in the first rising of You-Know-Who after claiming to have been under the effects of the Imperius Curse. As to being found at the Ministry of Magic when it came to light that You-Know-Who had in fact returned, Mr. Malfoy was cleared of any wrongdoing. His defence lawyer commented to the press briefly: “Mr. Malfoy is a senior Ministry employee. The Ministry is his place of work, and he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Can we really punish a man for putting in a night at the office?”

Mr. Malfoy has been offered a public apology and a generous amount in compensation for his time in Azkaban.

The Daily Prophet would like to apologise to Mr. Malfoy on behalf of the wizarding public, and declare also that any statement previously made by this office were not the personal opinion of this publication or its writers.”

“What a load of shite! Wrong place at the wrong time, my arse!” yelled Ron, and several of their housemates nodded in agreement.

Harry looked over to the Slytherin side of the room and scowled. Malfoy was smirking, a smug look on his pale, aristocratic face. “We

won't be able to shut Malfoy up now," he said, and the others turned to look as well.

Harry perused the rest of the paper. There had been a small Death Eater attack, but no one had been killed, just damage to property.

Harry left breakfast in a particularly foul mood and went straight to the chamber. Wednesday was a free day for him, so he wasn't missing any classes and none of his friends would notice that he wasn't around either. He was sorely tempted to go and get his book back from Snape's quarters now, even if Malfoy might be blamed, but he didn't want to risk Malfoy blabbing about the Chamber just to spite him.

-

Instead, he took out a book on Ancient Runes from a shelf in the library and, feeling a little rebellious, a book on the Dark Arts which he put aside for when he had completed his homework.

After runes and charms essays were completed, he took a look at the book. It was medium sized, leather-bound like most of the books in the library and the gilded title read 'Dark Arts and their Defence.' It turned out to be an interesting and informative read. It didn't have much history behind any of the spells, but it listed curses and their respective counter-curses one by one. Surely there was no harm in reading a book like this if it was for defence? He wrote down a few spells and their counters before attempting to practice some of them. The article about Malfoy that morning had reminded him of the fight at the Ministry, and he wondered if he could find the cutting curse that Dolohov had used. He hadn't heard it, but the effects were quite easy to remember. It seemed to have been a favourite of the Death Eaters, and he wanted to make sure he knew the correct counter-spell or shield for next time.

He spent a while searching, writing down a few possibilities before he decided it was time for lunch.

He apparated to the kitchens and back, again noticing the slight draining feel. It wasn't nearly as bad as when he had collapsed, but it

made him feel a little uneasy. He didn't think the pendant was dangerous, not sucking a little bit of his life energy every time he used it or anything, but it was disconcerting that he didn't know precisely how it worked. The only thing he could think of was that it took a fair bit of magic to make it work because it had to overcome the apparition wards that surrounded Hogwarts. While in Hogwarts, it could supplement his magic with that of the castle's, but when he was outside of the castle, it used up all his magical energy, and so he had collapsed until his levels had been replenished.

It seemed a feasible enough explanation, and as long as it wasn't hurting him, he was happy to continue using it.

oOo

That night, Harry had one of his worst dreams yet. Now that everyone was really starting to believe that Voldemort had returned, the man apparently saw no reason to keep people in the dark, and was outdoing himself famously in the 'torment and kill' department.

On this particular night, Harry watched through the eyes of Voldemort's large snake, Nagini, as his Death Eaters performed the Cruciatus on a muggle family. The smell of blood caught his senses as his tongue flicked the air, and he slowly slithered forward, seeing the terror in the eyes of the three children and their parents. He struck suddenly, clamping powerful jaws around the neck and shoulder of the father, sinking his fangs deep into the man's body. He struck again and again, ripping the man's flesh and drawing blood with each bite. The man fell limp and his screams died as his poison did its job, and Harry woke screaming in pain when Voldemort pulled his mind from the body of the snake.

Harry slapped a hand to his head, trembling with the pain and his breath ragged. His dorm mates were all awake, Ron beside his bed. "Harry mate, you alright?"

-

"Nightmare," he grunted. "Sorry to wake you guys up."

Ron leaned closer and said quietly, "vision?"

Harry shrugged. "Same as usual. Don't worry about it." He sat up as Ron went back to his bed, still cast concerned glances at Harry.

There was no way he was going back to sleep after that and as soon as Ron had pulled his curtains, Harry stood and went down to the common room. He couldn't remember if he had cleared his mind before trying to sleep. He thought not, given the intensity of the vision, even though it had become a routine for him. Harry tried to banish the bloody images from his mind, but they were emblazoned across his eyeballs, and he could see them whether he had his eyes open or closed.

He whiled away the hours till dawn staring blankly into the fire and desperately trying to stay awake. He was tired, but he knew that if he went back to sleep there would be no respite there.

oOo

Thankfully he had a short day, only charms and potions before lunch, and he spent the morning looking forward to lunch when he could get some sleep. He feigned through charms and did atrociously in potions, earning a severe glare and an insult from Snape, but he couldn't wait to get out of there. As soon as Snape has evanescoed his potion and he had cleaned up his work station, he fled the dungeon and made his way to Gryffindor Tower.

He threw his books down and collapsed on the bed, but sleep was not to come. From the common room he could hear shrieks and giggles from the younger students, and he sighed exasperatedly before storming down the stairs and out the portrait hole. He went straight to the chamber, only realising when he was standing in the library that he should have just used the pendant.

He headed straight to the room of requirement, and there instantly appeared the most enormous and luxurious bed Harry had ever laid eyes on. It was a huge wooden thing, beautifully carved, and the sheets were crisp and white. He collapsed into it, pulling all the blankets over him, and fell asleep instantly.



...

When Harry woke the sun was just setting, and he apparated to a corridor that was frequently deserted before walking the rest of the way to the Great Hall.

"Hey Harry, how were classes?"

Harry gave an indifferent wave of his hand as he reached for a jug of pumpkin juice. "Oh, you know, they were alright. I made a mess in potions, but who doesn't every now and then, eh?"

Neville grinned. "I know it better than anyone, I reckon."

Harry returned the grin and tucked in to his meal.

-

oOo

After dinner, Harry left for detention with Snape. He found Snape in his office and knocked tentatively.

"Come in," came Snape's imperious tone.

Harry took a seat in front of the desk without waiting for an invitation. Snape scowled but didn't say anything, continuing to write whatever he was writing.

After a minute he finished and looked up at Harry.

"What are Malfoy and I going to be doing sir?"

"Mr. Malfoy has been given the night off from detention. You and I will be having an Occlumency lesson. I trust you have not forgotten what little you learned last term?"

"No sir."

“Have you been clearing your mind each night as I said to do?”

“Yes. It doesn’t seem to be working though.”

Snape frowned, resting his fingertips together thoughtfully. “How do you mean?”

“I’ve been having more dreams than ever.”

“Is that perhaps the reason for your abysmal performance in class this morning?”

“Well I wasn’t exactly feeling up to par,” said Harry, getting a little annoyed.

Snape tisked, annoying Harry further, and Snape smirked as if realising that his attitude was irking Harry. “No need to be so snarky, Mr. Potter.”

Harry snorted. You can talk.

“We shall begin, then. Stand up, wand out. Same as usual, I will penetrate your mind and you will... attempt to expel me, by any means necessary.”

Harry stood and prepared himself, and suddenly there were images rolling across his vision. He was at dinner, chatting with Neville... joking with him on the way to Herbology... he was sinking his fangs into a bloodied body that screamed and jerked...

Harry found himself on the floor, bile rising in his throat at the memory of his last dream.

“I take it that is one of your more recent visions?”

Harry nodded, gulping fresh air as he got to his feet. “Last night.”

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“Well, your performance tonight is woefully lacking, I can tell that already. We shall end it here and see how you do on Saturday morning. Do not be late.”

“But sir, we only had one try...”

“Potter, you are clearly not up for it tonight and unless you want to be scrubbing cauldrons, I would suggest you leave now.”

Harry sighed, though he was relieved to be going. He took one last look at Snape before he shut the door behind him. The potions master was turning to the fireplace, throwing floo powder into the glowing flames.

‘Probably going to have a lovely little chat with the headmaster about my woefully lacking performance’ thought Harry sarcastically.

oOo

Hi guys : )

For anyone wondering if Harry’s going to get a girlfriend, i haven’t really decided yet. To be quite honest, I get bored by reading romances, so I don’t think I’d be particularly good at writing anything like that, but let me know what you think... if there’s an overwhelming amount of people that want some mush, i could probably be persuaded to write some.

Of course, that means you’ll have to review...

## A Spy Among Friends

The next day was Friday and they had their usual defence practical down by the lake. They trudged through the snow and down to an area that Hagrid had cleared at the request of Snape. It seemed all of Harry's friends had forgotten the snake incident, and he was quite happily chatting with Ron, Hermione, Parvati and Lavender when Snape arrived and began pairing up the class.

"Finnigan, Finch-Fletchly! Goyle, Bulstrode! Weasley, Thomas! Boot, Parkinson! Smith, Granger! Potter, Malfoy!"

Harry wasn't sure how to react. This was the second time he had been partnered with the Slytherin, as everyone in the class had now been with most other people. He decided it was a good pairing. Malfoy had been walking around gloatingly all week as if he owned the world, and Harry was very much looking forward to wiping the smug smirk off of his face. Also, he enjoyed duelling the Slytherin, out of everyone else in the class Malfoy put up the best defence, and over the holidays they had each gotten to know the other's style, which in a way created a bit more of a challenge.

He was surprised however, when Snape finished pairing people up and turned to address the class. "This term we will be focussing on a different aspect of defence. So far this year it has been one on one demonstrations so that we could discuss tactic. Now, we will be working on group defence. Working with a partner is significantly harder than working alone. Not only do you have to worry about yourself, you now have to look out for your partner while defending your position. As such, different tactics come in to play. Strategies such as casting wordless spells are still highly effective, though very few of you have managed that," he added, scowling at the class in general, "but team strategy is much different from individual strategy. Today, you will all be positioned at various points around the lake. Then, when you see my signal, you will set out to take down as many other teams as you can, sticking with the rules we have adhered to thus far. If your partner is knocked out, you continue on alone. Send up a flare and I will collect those knocked out of the competition. When there is only one partnership remaining, I will call you all in and

we will again discuss the tactics the winners used. We will have two practice weeks before starting a competition of sorts.”

The class sounded excited at the challenge, though most were grumbling about their partners. Harry was particularly displeased, having been looking forward to duelling against Malfoy. He somehow doubted they would work well together. The class set off around the lake, and once they reached the first stand of trees, Snape instructed Hermione and Zacharias Smith to remain behind. “Discuss strategy and wait for the signal to begin,” he instructed, before taking off again.

-

Harry and Malfoy were left at the far side of the lake, somewhere between the Goyle/Bulstrode and Brown/Bones partnerships. The trees around them were quite thick, and the forest was silent. They sat themselves down on some flat rocks that gave them a view of the lake through some low bushes.

“So, strategy eh? Got any ideas, Malfoy?”

“Let me tell you now, Potter. I work best on my own. Don’t cramp my style and we’ll get along fine, hold me back and I’ll hex you myself.”

Harry looked scornfully at the Slytherin. “I think the point of this exercise is to play to each other’s strengths, not work individually.”

“I know that, Potter.”

“Then let’s talk strategy. Snape’ll be sending up the signal to start soon, and I want a plan.”

Malfoy acquiesced, still glaring, but turning to look as Harry spoke.

“I think we should stay together, but a few metres apart, until we see another team. Then, we should split up more and sort of surround them as best we can. Me on one side of them, you on the other.”

“Take them from two sides, you mean? Yes, that would be best. Of course, we need to make sure we aren’t directly opposite each other or we could hit each other if we miss them.”

“Right, yeah. I didn’t think of tha-“

“Of course you di-“

“Don’t be snide, Malfoy. We’re meant to be discussing this like adults.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes and sneered, but replied, “I’m quite good at wordless spells, which will help take them by surprise. If we can stun them without alerting others to our presence, we’ll certainly have an advantage. Can you do a wordless stunner?”

Harry shook his head. “Not yet, but I know a Parseltongue spell that has a similar effect. If I use that, chances are they won’t hear me anyway.”

Malfoy nodded thoughtfully. “Okay, so that’s our first strategy – silent stunners. If that fails, what do you propose?”

“That’s where being on two sides will come in handy. One of us should step out first, let’s say me for now. Whoever they are will turn to me, and then you can step out and take them from behind.”

Malfoy nodded again. “In that case, you should respond only with a shield spell until I’ve got at least one of them down, no offensive spells. If you try to go one against two, you could easily get hit, and then I wouldn’t be on the winning team.”

“Sounds like a good plan. My shield charms are quite strong, a protego would be best in this situation.”

-

“I agree, but only if I’m not going to get hit by it, remember.”

“Don’t worry, I want to be on the winning team too, Malfoy. I’m not going to take out my partner with a careless spell.”

“Well so far Potter, our strategy seems sound, but what if it degenerates into an all out duel? In that case, we have to remember to stay apart and keep moving, but not get in front of each other. Of course, both of us are good duellists, so we should do alright there.”

Harry nodded his agreement. “What if we’re the ones caught by surprise?”

Malfoy frowned. “Hopefully that won’t happen. Perhaps we could lie in wait, and set a few boundary spells that would tell us if people are coming.”

“That’s a good idea. I don’t know any though, do you?”

“Some basic ones, yes.”

“I do like that idea, but I think we should leave that until most of the couples have been knocked out. Also, if you cast the spell, how will I know if it’s tripped?”

“I can try and link it to you as well. I’ve never done it personally, but I know one spell that is used for multiple people.”

“Okay. I reckon we’re ready, then. Unless there’s something else?”

“No, I think we’ve covered enough strategy to get us started. Just in time, too,” said Malfoy, pointing across the lake. Harry looked and saw Snape’s signal hanging in the air. The green sparks faded quickly and Harry and Malfoy stood, making their way into the forest. Harry stopped about twenty metres from the shoreline and Malfoy walked in another fifteen, and dropped back behind Harry.

They made their way through the forest, keeping low and listening for any of the other teams. Suddenly, Harry saw Goyle and Millicent creeping along the shoreline about thirty metres away. He raised his hand in a stop signal to Malfoy, and then pointed where he saw their opponents. Malfoy nodded, and Harry crouched down low and moved

quietly forward, stopping about twenty metres ahead of the two Slytherins.

Behind him, Malfoy was edging closer to the shore, crossing behind Harry and moving so that he was still in front of where Goyle and Millicent were heading.

Harry held his breath as Malfoy positioned himself beneath fallen log. He could just see the side of the blonde's face, and Malfoy turned to look at Harry, holding up three fingers.

Harry nodded, and watched as Goyle and Millicent drew level with him, then passed. They were now only about fifteen metres from Malfoy, but the low bushes shielded him. Harry pointed his wand at Millicent, who was closest to him and tracked her with it. Malfoy dropped a finger, then another. As he dropped the third, Harry cast the Parseltongue stunning spell he had learned.

"Esacia!"

-

He hissed in victory when Goyle and Millicent toppled to the ground almost simultaneously.

Hoping nobody was nearby, Harry shot red sparks into the sky, but the trees were too thick to see if there were any other sparks up there from other teams.

Just then, a small rock hit him in the side of the face, and Harry whipped his wand around, preparing to hex someone. It was Malfoy however, now crouching on the other side of the log. Malfoy gestured into the forest, and Harry looked in the direction he pointed. Jumping from tree to tree in an attempt at stealth and coming from the opposite direction to Goyle and Millicent, were Lavender Brown and Susan Bones.

Harry ducked down and glanced at Malfoy. They weren't in the optimum positions to carry out the strategy they had for Goyle and



Millicent, and Harry wasn't sure if Malfoy had a plan. Malfoy suddenly ducked away from the log, racing over to where Harry was.

Unfortunately, one of the girls had seen some movement and the two were now heading directly for them.

"Got a plan?" Harry whispered in Malfoy's ear.

"Not exactly. I don't think either of us can really move now without them seeing."

"Then we need to distract them somehow."

The two girls were getting very close now.

"Malfoy, can you do a wordless levitation charm?"

"I can try. It's not the sort of spell I've practised with."

"Well see if you can do it and levitate a rock up behind them, then drop it."

Malfoy, understanding what Harry wanted aimed his wand at a rock the size of a small cup and flicked his wand.

Nothing.

He gave it another flick. Still nothing, and the girls were even closer.

"Oh, sod it!" whispered Malfoy. "Wingardium Leviosa!"

The rock lifted off the ground, ever so slowly, and Malfoy levitated it around the girls, keeping it low so they wouldn't see it. Then, when the girls were nearly upon them, Malfoy raised the rock high into the air and let it fall. It hit the ground with a dull thud, but in the silence of the forest it startled the girls, Lavender giving a small shriek as both her and Susan spun to investigate the sound.

As one, Harry and Malfoy stood, pointing their wands at the girls' backs.

The two shouted stupefies hit their marks, and Lavender and Susan fell to the ground unconscious. Malfoy had foregone a wordless spell, and Harry the quiet Parseltongue, but luckily it did not appear -

as though anyone was around to hear them. This time, Malfoy cast the red sparks into the air before joining Harry crouched down among the bushes.

“Not bad, Potter. Although I think we should try to remember to keep it quiet.”

“I agree. Which way do you want to go?”

“You know that barrier spell I told you about? I think we should set one up now. Brown and Bones were the second group, right? So the only group behind them would be the mudblood and Smith.”

“Her name is Hermione!”

“Whatev-“

“I won’t have you insulting my friends, Malfoy!”

“Fine! It slipped out, alright? Now listen!”

Harry scowled, but motioned for Malfoy to continue.

“I don’t like having someone behind me, so if we take those two out, then we only have to worry about those who are ahead of us.”

Harry had to agree that the reasoning was sound. “Alright. How long will it take you to set up this barrier spell?”

“Well, I have to walk the barrier, and if you want to know when it gets set off, I have to link it back to you. It means I’ll be moving around a lot, so I’m going to need you to watch my back. If you see someone, call my name and curse them.”

Harry nodded and watched as Malfoy crept off, muttering some chant-like spell under his breath and holding his wand pointed at the ground. Remembering that he was supposed to be watching out for the Slytherin, Harry turned his gaze in the direction that Hermione and Smith would be coming from. He felt pretty certain that they were still in the game. Susan was probably above average in defence, and Lavender was certainly no slouch, but overall the Hermione/Smith partnership was stronger than the Bones/Brown one.

He cast his gaze in the opposite direction as well, in case someone came from that direction.

Five minutes later, Malfoy dropped down beside him, startling Harry, who hadn't even heard him coming.

"Done?"

Malfoy nodded, pointing his wand at first himself and then Harry, before ending the chant.

"Done. Now all we have to do is wait. Now, I'm going to go back a bit deeper in to the woods. Granger and Smith will probably be smart enough to put some distance between themselves, unlike those last two groups, and we should do the same. See that clump of bushes next to that tree? I'll be there, so you'll be able to see me quite clearly, but no one from behind or in front will be able to. You see them coming, you signal to me. On the count of three, we curse them, got it?"

-

Harry nodded and Malfoy crept off again, Harry searching the woods for signs of movement. Malfoy settled into position quickly, and not a minute after that Harry spotted Smith. He was creeping through the undergrowth a far way off, and Harry signalled to Malfoy. It appeared that Malfoy had already seen Smith, as he nodded and pointed at a spot closer to the shore. Harry leaned forward around his clump of bushes and saw Hermione, who was keeping a close eye on both Smith and her surroundings. Harry nodded to Malfoy, and they waited until their opponents were closer in range.

Harry felt two little tugs, and was startled before realising it must have been the charm Malfoy set.

He looked at the Slytherin, and saw that he had raised his hand, three fingers held up. Harry aimed his wand at Hermione through a gap in the foliage as Malfoy dropped a finger.

Suddenly, Harry heard a twig snap somewhere behind him and froze. He whipped his head around and came face to face with the tree at his back. He peered cautiously around, and saw Justin Finch-Fletchley crouched behind a rock, motioning to someone Harry couldn't see.

Harry looked desperately for Malfoy and saw him drop another finger. Withdrawing his wand, he waved desperately, but Malfoy's attention was trained on Smith.

Luckily, the boy looked, and Harry motioned for him to stop. Malfoy looked at him quizzically, and Harry pointed behind them, and then made a 'get down' motion. Malfoy understood and lowered his wand, flattening himself and glancing through the bushes behind him.

Harry looked back at Justin just as he leaped from behind his rock, firing off a 'tarantallegra' in a loud voice. Harry winced as the cry pierced the silence, and heard Hermione call out a shield charm from very close to his right. A duel began between the foursome, Harry watching as Smith and Hermione pushed Justin and Seamus back. For a second, Harry was sure he and Malfoy would be spotted as Hermione and Smith passed their hiding spaces, but they didn't and as soon as they had passed, Harry motioned for Malfoy to get up. This time, Harry held up three fingers and saw Malfoy's nod.

Harry pointed his wand at Hermione's back.

He heard a victorious cry from Hermione and saw Justin bound by ropes and wriggling on the ground. He dropped a finger, then another as Hermione turned to help Smith.

Seamus, now having two people to deal with, was almost immediately petrified by Smith.

At this point, Harry dropped his last finger and cast 'Esacia' at Hermione, who dropped soundlessly to the ground at the same moment as Smith.

"Yes!" Harry shot a thumbs up at Malfoy, who raised an eyebrow condescendingly and shot red sparks in to the air.

Just then, a loud echoing voice rang through the forest. "All students to return to the usual meeting place at the side of the lake. Kindly bring along any students unable to bring themselves."

Harry followed Snape's instructions and turned to enervate Hermione. "Potter, stop."

"Why?"

-

"Wouldn't you prefer to march in floating your prize in front of you, rather than having it harass you all the way back?"

Harry snorted, but grinned at the thought of floating eight bodies back around the lake, and he didn't think Malfoy would let him make an exception just for Hermione.

So, taking four bodies each, Harry and Malfoy took off for the gathering spot, preceded by Hermione, Smith, Lavender, Susan, Justin (still struggling in his ropes), Seamus, Goyle, and Millicent.

oOo

"I can't believe you and Malfoy tried to take the credit for getting Justin and Seamus, Harry!" scolded Hermione at dinner that night. You know full well that Zaccharius and I got them!"

"But Hermione," said Harry, smiling innocently, "It's all about strategy. We let you take them out. We were lying in wait for you and Smith,

but then Seamus and Justin came along and we thought we'd just see who finished who off first."

Beside Hermione, Ron chortled. "He's right, Mione. They just got lucky. Don't get so worked up about it. Anyway, at least you took out some one, and you did get your points in the end. Me'n Dean got taken out by Nott and Zabini in minutes."

"You shouldn't sound so pleased about that, Ronald."

Ron grinned happily at Hermione's displeasure and continued to shovel potatoes into his mouth.

Hermione continued to reprimand Harry. "You also shouldn't have refused to tell the class what tactics you used. Gryffindor isn't doing so well for the house cup this year."

Harry and Malfoy had at first refused to explain their tactics, Malfoy claiming that they were no good if everyone knew what they were. They had been forced to tell however when Snape threatened to take points.

oOo

That night Harry slept soundly and so he was feeling quite optimistic about his Occlumency lesson as he made his way down to the dungeons after breakfast on Saturday. His attitude paid off, and it turned out to be the best lesson he had had so far. He arrived and Snape pushed aside a pile of essays that he had just begun to mark. Harry stood facing Snape across the desk as the professor aimed his wand at Harry.

"I want you to expel me from your mind without using your wand."

"But using my wand is the only way I've done it so far."

"And that is the problem. You may not always have your wand, and using your wand is not actually blocking me from your mind. It is merely distracting me. A good Legilimens will be able to infiltrate your

mind without you even knowing. It is for this reason that you need to practise using your mental defences. Legilimens.”

-

For a few seconds, the images flashed through his mind as Snape sorted through them easily. Harry focussed on pushing Snape from his mind, and very quickly the images slowed. Harry fought against them, but after a few minutes he was breathing heavily and could no longer hold Snape back. The images once again began to roll across his mind.

Snape ended the spell and Harry collapsed in his chair.

“Better. You managed to slow me down considerably, but only for a short amount of time.”

Harry looked up surprised. Snape hadn’t exactly complimented him, but he hadn’t insulted him either, even if he was wearing his customary sneer.

“I just don’t know how I’m actually supposed to push you out.”

Snape mused for a second. “There is a difference between me being in your consciousness and being able to sort through your memories at will. I think it is time to try a slightly different tact.” Snape took a seat and continue speaking. “We are going to practise clearing your mind, as you don’t seem to be doing this very well. I am going to show you some breathing techniques-”

“Like meditation.”

“Don’t interrupt. Yes, it is like meditation. You need to learn to be aware of your mind and consciousness without focussing directly on anything. This will allow you to see more.”

“See more?”

“Similar to the way we use our peripheral vision. You may focus entirely on one object and miss everything else around you. Your

peripheral vision picks up those movements that you are not focussed on. Do you understand?"

Harry gave a small nod. "I think so."

"Very well. Make yourself comfortable and close your eyes."

Feeling that those two things were mutually exclusive goals when he was in the presence of Snape, Harry did as he was told.

Snape spoke again, and his voice was quiet, and softer than usual. "To start with, I do not want you to clear your mind, just do as I instruct you."

Snape began to instruct Harry on the 'correct' way to breathe. Feeling quite silly at first, his mind kept wandering. Gradually however, he began to calm, the steady rhythm lulling him into a state of rest...

Two sharp knocks shocked Harry, making him jump. His eyes snapped open as he cursed loudly.

"Ten points for language, Potter!" snapped Snape, getting up to answer the door.

Snape conversed shortly with whoever was at the door before resuming his seat as Harry calmed his breathing.

-

Harry frowned as Snape pushed aside a pile of marked assignments. "When did you do those?"

"Whilst you were meditating."

"But we were only doing that for about ten minutes."

"I was only doing it for ten. You were meditating for closer to an hour, actually."

"Er... I think maybe I fell asleep, Professor."



“No, sometimes it feels like not much time has passed when in fact it has been much longer. It is a sign that you were doing the right thing, amazingly enough.”

“Oh, okay. So I guess I should practise that?”

“Yes, this method should allow you to clear your mind more easily. When you can slip into that state of mind more quickly we will progress to the next stage.”

“What’s that?”

“I shall tell you when we get there. Now get out.”

oOo

It was only ten o’clock when Harry left Snape’s office, and he went back to the common room to do homework before Quidditch practice. He knew he was banned, but he had told his team and now needed to train up Seamus as reserve chaser in case the ban wasn’t lifted before the first match, which was on the 24th of January. It was against Hufflepuff who were playing quite well this year.

...

After the practice, Harry was walking up to the castle when he was approached by Professor McGonagall. “Mr. Potter, I quite clearly recall saying that you were banned from Quidditch until further notice.”

“I wasn’t playing Professor, but I need to help train up Seamus in case I don’t get to play in the first match.”

“This ban is a punishment, Mr. Potter, and if I catch you flying again until such time as I tell you that you may, I will extend the punishment and you will miss more than one game.”

Harry scowled at his Head of House and said stiffly, “Yes Professor.”

McGonagall dismissed him and Harry continued up to the Tower to put his broom away. Everyone else was already at dinner and the Common Room was empty.

Harry was feeling particularly weary, and not at all up to climbing the stairs. Instead, he straddled his broom and took to the air. The ceiling of the common room was very high up, even if you were standing on the upper levels where the dormitories were. Harry soared higher until he could have stretched out a hand to touch the stone ceiling. He looked around at the common room, a feeling of happiness swelling in his chest. This was the first place he had ever truly called home, and everything -

had a story. There were the desks where Harry and his classmates studied, the floor cushions where he and his friends played exploding snap, the comfortable arm chairs and lounges where they would relax for hours on end, and, he thought with a pang, the fireplace where he had spoken to Sirius in their fifth year.

He glanced around, feeling a mixture of happiness and hurt, when suddenly he saw something that made him exclaim out loud.

At the top of the stairs that led to the dormitories there was a balcony, the floor made from polished redwood. The wood was shot through with streaks of reddish brown and here and there were scattered knotholes, forming intricate patterns in the wood, which shone in the light from the wall sconces. It was not the beauty of the wood that caught Harry's eye, however. It would have been unnoticeable from the balcony itself, but from the air, the seemingly random splotches and patterns of the wood converged to form a magnificent image of a snake in the middle of the balcony, just set back from the top of the stairs. It was curled in a loose circle, its head just past the tail.

"Yesss! Salzzzz, do you ssseeeee? It isss what I have been sssearching for." To Harry's surprise, Salazar liked flying, and as he didn't know how much he would be doing for a while, had taken her with him to practice.

The little snake cautiously stuck her head out from Harry's sleeve. "That'sss a big sssnake, Harrryyy. Why am I sssso little when all the other sssnakesss are sssso big?"

Harry chuckled at the little snake's preoccupation with size. "Thatsss not a real ssnake, Salzzz. Mossst snakesss are your sssize, and don't worry, you won't always be sssso sssmall."

The little snake gave a hiss of pleasure at that and Harry circled lower towards the balcony. The closer he got, the less snake-like the image appeared, but now that he knew it was there, he could still easily tell. In the very centre of the two metre wide circle created by the snake was a small knot hole.

Making a quick decision, Harry stowed his broom in his trunk and stuffed his invisibility cloak into his pocket and returned to the landing, standing just outside the circle. Checking once more that there was no one in the room, he looked down at the snake and hissed "Open."

At first he thought nothing had happened, but then he noticed that the knot hole in the centre had faded, and that the whole floor was fading from the centre of the circle outwards. At the same time, the snake on the floor was twisting in a circle, similar to how the one on the pendant moved when he used it. Gradually the fading reached the snake and stopped, the snake coming to a rest as well. The floor had opened up to reveal a straight stair case leading down into blackness.

Harry placed a foot on the topmost stair. No sooner had he done so, then a wall sconce burst into life on the wall lining the stairs. At the same time, he noticed the circle start to fade back into existence from the outside in, and he quickly descended down the steps to get out of the way.

As he went deeper, wall sconces lighted themselves and after a minute the stairs ended, coming to a long low passage that sloped gently downwards. The floor and walls were made of stone, the walls dry and cold.

After walking for about two minutes, he came to a small round room that had several doors leading off of it. He thought this must be the same as the Slytherin one, with one door leading to the student dorms, one to the chambers of the Head of House, and the others to... where? Perhaps to the transfiguration classroom?

Wanting to get to the chamber, Harry took the path with no symbol, which was also the only path that continued to slope downwards. He walked in a straight line for about ten minutes, wall sconces lighting ahead of him and then extinguishing once he had passed. Finally, he came to the room he recognised, where there were doors with the house symbols above them. He was going to take the one to the chamber when he had a second thought.

Instead, he took the path that would lead him to Snape's quarters. Soon, he came to the painting and stepped through the chilly waterfall. As soon as he had dried he moved sideways, into the portrait of Phineas Nigellus. Once again, it was empty. This time, instead of walking into the next frame, Harry went to the door that was painted on the back wall.

Opening the door, he found himself in an empty room that had three doors leading off of it. On one door, Harry saw the words 'Twelve Grimmauld Place' written in gold lettering, making his heart leap. He immediately reached out for the handle, but thought better of it. He wasn't sure he wanted to return there just yet.

He turned to the second door and saw that it said 'Headmasters Office, Hogwarts.' Harry smiled wickedly, opening the door a sliver and peeking through. The room was empty, but through the canvas he could see the other side of the office and hear muted voices, as if through a long tunnel. Stepping back, he drew the invisibility cloak over himself and opened the door further creeping in to the room.

He proceeded to the canvas barrier that separated him from the real world. It was a strange feeling. When he stood at the door, he was tiny compared with the size of the canvas, which seemed quite far off. As he stepped closer however, the canvas approached rapidly, his footsteps carrying him far further than they should have, and he found

that by the time he reached the canvas, it only fit his head and shoulders.

He looked down in to the office from his elevated position and saw Dumbledore seated at his desk across from an assortment of adults. He could see several teachers, including Hagrid, McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout and Snape, as well as others; Mundungus Fletcher, Tonks, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Moody. They were all talking quietly amongst themselves and as he watched, they were joined by Arthur Weasley and Lupin.

Harry realised with a thrill that this must be an Order meeting. He grinned. If that was the case, he might finally learn something!

At that point, Dumbledore stood and cleared his throat.

"I have called you here for a brief meeting in regards to Lucius Malfoy and his release from Azkaban. By now you would all know he was released earlier this week."

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"It's outrageous, Dumbledore. How could the man have managed to convince the Wizengamot of his innocence a second time?" came a question from the crowd.

"I believe it is due to the fact that he was declared innocent a first time. It was claimed by his defence that any evidence incriminating him was purely circumstantial, and I'm afraid to say that they really are right in that regard."

Angry muttering met this statement, and Dumbledore held up a hand to silence them.

"There is also the fact that Lucius is a senior ministry official himself, and makes generous contributions quite regularly. However, that is not what we are here to discuss. Severus, have you any news on what Lucius is doing with his recently gained freedom?"

The people in the room turned to look at a man who leaned against the wall at the back of the office, dressed in black.

“He has of course returned to the Dark Lord’s side. Overall, Lucius seems quite unaffected by his prolonged stay in Azkaban and is his usual self.”

“And would you kindly relay the Dark Lord’s next plan, Severus.”

Dumbledore had clearly already been briefed by Snape.

“He intends to stage a mass breakout of his followers from Azkaban. He means to free the rest of those taken at the Ministry last June, more if he is able. Although he did not say, I am also under the impression that he is trying to gain the allegiance of the Dementors.”

There were cries of dismay through the office and Dumbledore spoke again. “Kingsley, Moody and Tonks, as Ministry Aurors I would like the three of you to gather what information you can on the status of Azkaban. Keep a look out for anyone else who might be looking into it; they could be working for Tom.” Harry saw three heads nod.

“We will have our regular Order meeting tomorrow night with everyone. Until then, do not talk about what we have heard tonight. Severus, remain behind, if you would. There is something I would like to discuss with you.”

The other Order members recognised the dismissal and filed out of the room, leavin Dumbledore with an irate looking Snape.

“What is it you wish to speak to me about Albus. I have several potions brewing that cannot be left unattended for long.”

“Ah, I shall be brief then. How is young Harry doing in his studies?”

Harry jumped when he heard his name, and he wondered how often he was discussed in this office.

“Fine Albus, as I have told you repeatedly. He may never be resplendent in the art but without the Weasley spawn distracting him,

he manages to at least be adequate. His grades have been slowly improving, and that is more than sufficient for him to remain in my class, much as it pains me to admit it.”

-

Harry grinned. Snape would have never admitted that to him. His grin faded added however, at Dumbledore’s next question, and Snape’s answer.

“And what of his Occlumency lessons?”

“He doesn’t really have the temperament for Occlumency, I fear. Progress is there, but it slow. His lesson this morning was his best yet. I have started teaching him a different technique.”

Dumbledore sighed wearily. “You are the best there is Severus, better even than myself. If he is not learning it is assuredly not your fault. He knows the need to learn it, and I’m sure he will get there eventually, with your expertise and guidance.”

“We shall see.”

Suddenly, Harry heard the sound of a door open and close, and leaned forward to see who had entered the office. He frowned when he saw that there was no one there. It was then that he heard the footsteps, coming from behind him. He spun, and let out a gasp as he saw the former headmaster of Hogwarts, Phineas Nigellus, walking towards him, and approaching at a rapid rate. Up this close to the frame, there was barely enough room for him, let alone another full grown man.

Harry moved quicker than lightening, jumping into the next frame and praying there was no one in there for him to run into. Thankfully there wasn’t. In fact, he wasn’t in a portrait at all, but a scene of the castle he was currently in. He remembered now that the portraits in Dumbledore’s office were interspersed with a few landscapes and other paintings here and there. This was a much better place to spy from, as there was very little chance that here on the great grassy

lawn beside the Black Lake, that some random painting would run into him.

“Headmaster?” came the nasally voice from the portrait beside him.

“Phineas, were you able to deliver the message?”

“Yes, Molly said she will have everything prepared for the meeting tomorrow night. She wants to know how many people will be attending.”

“Tell her everyone will be there except for Minerva, would you?”

“Very well.” Phineas left, muttering something about being treated like a house elf.

Harry realised he must be going to Grimmauld Place.

After that, both Dumbledore and Snape left the office, and Harry retreated to the chamber. If there was one thing he had learned in the past year, it was that you got a whole lot further if you did things for yourself. He needed to know as much as possible if he was going to defeat Voldemort, and spying on Order meetings seemed the perfect way to find out what was going on.

oOo

The next night as Harry was walking down to dinner with Ron and Hermione, he saw Dumbledore and Flitwick leaving the castle. “Where d’you reckon they’re off to?” asked Ron.

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“Dunno,” replied Harry. They reached the Gryffindor Table, but instead of taking a seat with the others, Harry grabbed a few chicken legs and potatoes, wrapping them in a napkin. “Whatcha doin’ Harry?”

“Got some stuff I need to do. I’ll see you guys later, alright?”



Ron and Hermione exchanged a look, but Harry ignored it and left the Great Hall. As soon as he reached an empty corridor he pulled out the pendant and was soon standing in front of the waterfall painting.

He had been carrying his invisibility cloak with him all day, waiting to see when Dumbledore was going to leave, and he pulled it out now, covering himself completely.

Harry hesitated when he reached the door that would take him to Grimmauld Place. Pushing aside painful memories, he opened the door and stepped through. He recognised the room through the canvas at once. It was the drawing room, now clean and tidy. He moved on quickly, hoping there was a painting in whatever room the meeting was to take place in.

From the times he had stayed here he was betting on the kitchen, but he couldn't remember if there was one in there or not. He hoped he didn't have to go through the portrait of Sirius' mother.

Grimmauld Place didn't have many pictures and he reached his destination sooner than he expected. It was in fact the kitchen, and it was currently packed full. There were so many people in there that he doubted any of them could move.

The painting he was in was picture of a barn, and he was currently standing outside of it. He walked over and pulled open the door, wincing as it creaked on rusty hinges. Not wanting to attract attention, he settled for squeezing through the small gap and wriggled in to the barn. It smelled of earth and hay. There was a tall ladder reaching up to a loft, and Harry ascended it carefully, praying the old ladder didn't break.

Once he reached the top, he moved over to the window, settling himself on a bale of hay. He had a wonderful view of the entire room, and luckily most people were faced away from him, towards the elderly wizard who was talking at the front of the room. Harry listened as Dumbledore repeated what Snape had said yesterday, with a few extra details added here and there.

Overall, it wasn't a very informative meeting, but it was still better than not knowing anything. The biggest development was that Lupin was being sent off to try and recruit the werewolves, a mission that would see him gone for months. Another good point was that Harry got to learn names of some people who were in the Order that he had never met before.

At the end of the meeting, Harry made his way back to the portrait in the drawing room. When he got there, he had a shock. There was no door! Harry ran towards the wall, running his hands over it desperately. To his great relief, a door materialised in the far corner, and he rushed over, yanking it open. He was back in the room of three doors, and he took the one that would allow him to get back to the chamber.

oOo

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Hello!! Please review, otherwise I don't know if people like it or not It took me a few hours to write this chapter, and reviewing takes less than a minute.. I'll try and get the next chapter out soon. Until next time :)

REVIEWERS:

fhippogriff: thanks, I didn't realise!

AnUnknownHypocrite: Thanks for reviewing. Sorry, but this isn't going to be a slash story. Hope you still like it.

Voldemort is Dead: Hi! Two great reviews, thank you so much. I think you're going to like the way the story is headed. : )

MoonlightxParasite: Thank you! That's what I like to hear from reviewers – makes me feel good and write faster :)

## Strategy

Harry had been practising as Snape had told him to do for nearly two weeks and whilst the meditation was relaxing and made it much easier to clear his mind, it didn't seem to be helping stop the visions. Harry told Snape this on Thursday night when he went for his Occlumency lesson. Snape appeared interested with the information, but said nothing about it.

"I think it is time we moved on from practicing the mediation. I want you to come up with something to use as a barrier for your mind. It can be anything you want. Usually, one would use something they associate with strength. You might use a wall, fire, smoke, darkness. It may take a few tries to find the one that works best for you."

Harry thought about it for a minute before settling on a wall; strong and tall. "Okay, I've got something. A wall."

"Now, I want you to envisage that wall in your head. I want you to picture the details; what is it made of, how thick is it, is it smooth or rough? I want you to imagine that the wall is surrounding your thoughts and memories – no one can get in."

Harry sat quietly with his eyes closed, imagining a high wall. It was made of stone, and very hard.

"Now, I am going to attempt to get access to your thoughts. This will be easy if the wall does not surround all of your mind. Also, if the barrier you have chosen is not good enough, you will need to improve it. Legilimens."

Harry focussed on the wall, an image forming in his head of his brain surrounded by a wall. It made him mentally chuckle and lose concentration, and images were suddenly rushing through his mind.

"Well that wasn't a very good start, was it?" came Snape's snide comment.

Harry scowled. "I'm doing my best, alright?"

“Really? How sad. Again.”

Harry soon found that not only was the wall not surrounding all of his thoughts, but it was also not a good enough wall. At first, he had pictured the wall in his mind as a sort of Hogwarts- like castle wall, complete with battlements. However, as he imagined this scene, he saw a dark-robed figure appear in his mind, walking up to the high stone wall. Harry could not imagine how the figure could get over the wall, but it began to climb, sticking pale fingers between the cracks in the rocks and pulling itself up. Once again, Snape got to his memories.

“You see, Potter. I was able to get into your mind because I found a way to get around the wall.”

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They tried again, and this time Harry imagined the wall was made not of rock, but cement – smooth, with no crevices for Snape to crawl up. Suddenly however, a ladder appeared next to the wall, and Snape once again reached the top of the wall – and Harry’s thoughts.

And so Harry added a roof to the walls. Unfortunately, Snape created a chimney to counter this approach, and once again Harry found the man perusing his thoughts.

“I think perhaps we will try a different barrier next time. You will find that not many Occlumists use a wall as their barrier. It would be sufficient against an amateur, but the Dark Lord will gain access to your thoughts as quickly as I did. I need only envisage a door and I could walk right through.”

“Well if you can do anything, how will I ever stop you?”

“With practice you will be able to do so. At the moment your mind is weak, but with practice it will grow stronger. It will be more difficult for me to simply imagine a door and have it appear in your mind as I did tonight, do you understand?”

“I guess.”

“We shall end here for tonight.”

Feeling mentally drained, Harry retreated to Gryffindor Tower and fell asleep instantly.

oOo

The next day, Harry was partnered with Parvati during defence. Due to being in the DA the previous year, Parvati was a reasonable duellist, but she had no sense of strategy at all and was taken out by Hermione after about fifteen minutes. Harry managed to continue on his own from there, only encountering one other pair in the forest before the end of the class, but because Parvati had been knocked out that was equal to a loss.

At the end of the class, they discussed the techniques used by Malfoy and Nott, who had made a formidable team.

oOo

On Saturday afternoon, Harry walked with Hermione and Neville down to the Quidditch pitch. He was looking forward to the match, even though he would not be playing. McGonagall had told him the ban would be lifted after the match. Harry thought this was particularly unfair, given that Malfoy wouldn't have to miss a match, but kept his mouth shut in case McGonagall took points.

The game started badly for Gryffindor. Hufflepuff had certainly improved from the last year, due to the replacement of two of their chasers and both beaters. The new team meshed well and played much better than the previous years'.

Within a half hour, the score was 60 – 0 in favour of Hufflepuff, and Harry was groaning along with the rest of the Gryffindors as their own team failed again and again to score. The jeers coming from the Slytherin stands made it all the worse.

-

The voice of the announcer suddenly grew louder. "And Gryffindor is in possession of the quaffle, a nice snatch by Bell there. Bell passes to O'Fier. O'Fier back to Bell... Bell to Finnigan."

Harry was on the edge of his seat as the three chasers streaked up the pitch for the goals.

"Ooh, a nice bludger by Benson there, nearly unseated Finnigan. Is he going to score?"

Seamus dodged another bludger and a Hufflepuff chaser, coming out in front of the middle hoop. Harry watch with bated breath as the Irish boy drew back the hand holding the quaffle. The Hufflepuff keeper was speeding towards the middle goal as Seamus hurled the quaffle through the air...

"GRYFFINDOR SCORES!" Seamus' aim had been dead true and the quaffle had found its mark. He was pumping the air, and received a pat on the back from several team mates. The Gryffindor stands erupted in cheers, their hopes renewed.

After that, Hufflepuff scored two more goals in quick succession, and it began to look like this just wasn't Gryffindor's day, when Ginny suddenly went into a dive towards one of the Hufflepuff goals. The other players turned to watch just as Ginny reached out a hand and grabbed the tiny golden ball from the air, and the Gryffindor stands erupted in tumultuous applause and screams.

Harry happily joined his friends in the Gryffindor Tower to celebrate the victory, leaving a few hours later for dinner.

oOo

Harry didn't return to the party after dinner; instead he made his way to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. It had been a while since he had spent any actual time in the chamber, apart from just passing through. It would be much easier to use the pendant, but he liked walking.

He was nearly there when a boy stepped out of the shadows in front of him.

“Malfoy? What are you doing?”

“Waiting for you.”

Harry looked around warily. “Er... why?”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Why do you think, Potter. What’s the only reason I put up with you these days?”

“I see. Well, I’m on my way there now, if you’ve changed your mind.”

“Changed my mind? What do you mean?”

They fell in to step together, making their way to the bathroom.

“You seemed pretty pissed off the other day. I didn’t think you’d want to be going back.”

Malfoy groaned loudly. “Potter, how could I not want to go back to the chamber? Are you telling me you’ve been back there without me?”

-

“Just a few times. I found the way from Gryffindor Tower, you know. There’s an image of a snake in the wood, and it opens up into a staircase. It’s a bit faster than coming this way.”

“Awesome... can you show me?”

“Not now. It isn’t hidden away like the one in the Slytherin common room, and I doubt the Gryffindors would appreciate seeing a Slytherin in there. Plus, I don’t want anyone to find out about it, that would just be stupid.”

“True, I suppose. Maybe tonight when everyone’s asleep?”

“Maybe. Is there any particular reason you wanted to go down there now?”

Malfoy shrugged. "Not really. I just wanted to get away from the common room for a while. Find some peace and quiet."

"I know what you mean. Sometimes I can't wait to get away. Especially tonight, everyone's still celebrating the Quidditch game."

"I thought you'd be with them."

"Nah, I was for a while, but it was getting kinda loud. Plus, it's different when you weren't the one that won the game. Takes the shine off a bit, I guess."

"Hmm. I can't believe Snape and McGonagall banned us from Quidditch!" said Malfoy passionately. "Plus taking points and the detentions."

"Yeah, at least you won't be missing one of your games though."

Malfoy smirked gloatingly. "Well, a Malfoy always comes off best."

"Shut up."

They walked in silence for a minute before Malfoy said, "You do know that if Weasley hadn't caught the Snitch Gryffindor would have been trounced, don't you?"

"Ugh, I know. I don't even want to think about it."

"Your team played atrociously, really," said Malfoy conversationally.

Harry punched Malfoy lightly in the arm and received a scowl in return. "I thought I told you to shut up."

They came to the girl's bathroom and Harry opened up the sink, descending the steps into the tunnel.

"Why were you coming down here tonight?" asked Malfoy.

"Same as you, just to get away for a while. Like I said, the party was getting loud. I was going to go through the paintings again."



“Are you stupid? Have you forgotten what happened last time?”

-

“No, but it was an adventure. Don’t you have any sense of fun?”

“Of course I do. I also have a healthy sense of self preservation.”

Harry sighed. “Well, I was only going to go to that painting outside the potions classroom. I want to see what he’s making again.”

“Don’t you think people will start getting suspicious if we know what it is all the time?”

“So it’s we, is it? Decided to come, have you?” Harry faltered at Malfoy’s deadly look. “Anyway, what are people going to think? No one will ever guess how we’re finding out.”

“Why do you need to find out anyway?”

“Well I think it’s only fair that I get back the points I lost my house. You could get yours back too.”

Malfoy deliberated for a minute. “Fine, but we’re going no further than that painting. I don’t want to get lost for days on end again.”

“It wasn’t days on end. Besides, it was fun.”

“Agree to disagree.”

“Fine.”

...

They were approaching the waterfall portrait when Malfoy asked, “Why haven’t you stolen back the book yet? I thought you were going to do it as soon as all the students returned.”

"I told you I was going to do it when you didn't know the password, and as I haven't really talked to you since Christmas..." Harry shrugged. "Besides, I think Snape will... know. That it was me."

Malfoy gave him a sideways glance. "Yes, Severus does have a way of knowing things, doesn't he?"

Harry got the strong impression that Malfoy knew Snape was a Legilimens, and decided to push a bit. "It's like he can read your mind or something, the way he stares at you, and he always knows what's going on."

"Maybe he can," said Malfoy smugly.

Harry faked a laugh. "Don't be ridiculous. No one can read minds... can they?"

Malfoy gave Harry a condescending glance then. "The mind is not a book to be read Potter. It cannot be perused at one's leisure."

Harry hid a smirk. It sounded to him as if Malfoy was directly quoting a source, probably Snape.

Malfoy continued. "It is a practice called Legilimency, and only very talented minds can do it. I'm learning!" he finished smugly, puffing his chest up proudly, and Harry nearly laughed at his boyish enthusiasm.

-

"You've never read my mind, have you?"

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Of course not. You'd know it if I had. Only practiced Legilimens can intrude the mind without the other person knowing. At my level, you'd feel it like a ton of bricks falling on your head."

"Do you have a book or something?"

"Some, but it's the kind of thing that you learn by actually doing. Severus is teaching me."

Harry was surprised that Malfoy was learning Occlumency. He recalled Snape saying it was harder than Occlumency, and wondered if Malfoy knew the latter. "Is there a way to stop someone from performing Legilimency on you?"

"Yes, you can learn to hide your thoughts. That's called Occlumency."

"Can you do that?"

"Yes, I'm quite proficient, which Severus says is a great achievement for someone of my age. I'm still training though. I'm absolutely no match for him."

Harry had a sudden thought. "Will you teach me? Otherwise Snape will know I took the book, and he'll know you told me where to get it, and he might even find out about the chamber!"

"Please tell me that you're joking. I really have no desire to go looking through your mind. Why do you even need that book. There's hundreds of dark arts books down , I'm not particularly skilled at Legilimency yet."

"It's a matter of principal. I paid for the book, it's mine and I want it back. As to you not being skilled at Liegilimency, you know the basics, right? You could get into my mind, and I would be able to push you out?"

"I really don't think it's a good idea, Potter."

"Come on, please. I really want to learn it... It'll give you a chance to practice your Legilimency against someone who isn't an expert in Occlumency..."

This seemed to sway Malfoy slightly, and he glanced at Harry as though assessing him. "It would... I'll have to think about it."

Not wanting to pressure the Slytherin, Harry quickly agreed, and they stepped into the world of paintings.

...

Much quicker than the first time, they came upon the painting of the potions lab. Luckily, there was again no one in it, and Harry followed Malfoy over to the steaming cauldron. A thick brown liquid was bubbling sluggishly in the pewter tank, and both boys wrinkled their noses at the smell. Harry however, also grinned.

"What are you smiling for? That smells absolutely foul!"

"Because I know what it is!" said Harry superiorly, receiving a scowl from the Slytherin.

"How can you possibly know what it is when I, the best potions student in this school, don't know what it is."

"I've made it before."

Suddenly, a voice sounded behind them and they both froze. "What, may I ask, are you two doing around my cauldron? Step away now, before you ruin it!"

Harry looked sideways at Malfoy. "Run!" he muttered, and they stumbled between desks, attempting to keep their backs to the potions student. They heard him yell "Hey!" and start running after them, and they dashed through the portraits back to the water fall. Across the field of daisies and past the screeching mermaid, through Phineas' portrait, and finally to the water fall. They stood panting, and suddenly heard a loud banging coming from beside them. "Let me through! How did you get through here? Hey!"

Satisfied that the student couldn't get through, Harry's breathing gradually eased. "Do you think he saw our faces?"

Malfoy shook his head, his breathing already back to normal. "I don't think so, he would have recognised us for sure, and it didn't sound like he did."

They made their way back to the library and sprawled out on the big lounge. "So, what was it?"

“Huh?” said Harry stupidly.

“The potion?”

“Oh! Right, yeah. It was Polyjuice Potion.”

“Of course! I can’t believe I didn’t recognise it – I’ve read all about it.” Suddenly he snorted, and shot Harry a suspicious look. “Hang on, you told me you’d made it. I don’t believe you. Polyjuice is way above even NEWT levels.

“Well, to be quite honest Hermione did most of the making. Ron and I just helped out.”

“You expect me to believe that you and Weasley helped Granger make the Polyjuice Potion? Come on Potter, I’m not stupid.”

“It’s true. We made it in second year when-“

Malfoy had burst out laughing, and Harry looked at him confused. “What?”

“You actually had me going for a minute there. I actually nearly believed it, when you said Granger had helped you. But second year? Yeah right!”

“But we did!”

“There is no way a second year could make Polyjuice.”

“Fine! Don’t believe me.”

“I don’t.”

Harry scowled, determined that he prove it to Malfoy. “It’s got lace wings, and boomslang skin, and it has to stew for-“

“I know how it’s made, Potter. Though I am surprised you know it well enough to quote even that much.”

"I can prove it to you."

"Yeah, how's that?"

Harry was fairly sure Ron and Hermione wouldn't want him to tell anyone, let alone Snape's godson about how they had stolen ingredients and posed as a couple of Slytherins, but Malfoy wouldn't tell anyone.

"Do you remember in second year how Hermione was in the hospital wing for a few days?"

Malfoy smiled at the memory. "Ah, yes. The mudblood got petrified by the basilisk."

Harry scowled, but continued. "No, before that. She had hair all over her face, and ears like a cat."

"Hmm, yes. I do vaguely recall a few comments made by some friends of mine around that time. What has that to do with this?"

"Well, the reason Hermione looked like that was because of the Polyjuice Potion."

"Aha! So you stuffed it up, did you? That I can believe."

"No, it worked fine. Her, Ron and I all had a different hair, only Hermione's turned out to be a cat hair, and as you probably know, the Polyjuice Potion is only used for human transformations.

Malfoy chuckled. "I can just imagine the look on your faces when she sprouted whiskers. Why were you even making that potion anyway? It's far above the level of second years, and dangerous too. I've heard it's painful."

"It was, and it tasted foul, too. We were making it because we wanted to find out who the Heir of Slytherin was, and the only way to talk to them about it was to pose as the person's friends."

“Haha!” Malfoy was chuckling again, but leaning forward interested. “Who did you think it was?”

Harry blushed slightly, smiling at the memory. “Er, well... to be honest, we thought it was... you.”

Malfoy sat stunned for a second before bursting out in laughter. “What! Laugh. You though. Laugh. It was. Laugh. Me?”

“Well, you are in Slytherin. I know it sounds ridiculous now, but come on! We were twelve.”

Malfoy shook his head, smiling. Suddenly he stopped and frowned. “You said you posed as my friends to talk to me. Did it work?”

Harry smirked. “It did indeed.”

“I don’t believe it! When?”

“I don’t remember exactly. Hermione took a hair she thought was Millicent Bulstrode’s, but it turned out Millicent had a cat. Ron and I posed as Crabbe and Goyle. We knocked Crabbe and Goyle out with some tainted fairy cakes (Here Malfoy shook his head resignedly.) and dragged them into a broom closet. We took their shoes and went to Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom.”

“Why there?” Malfoy interrupted.

“No one ever goes in there, it was the perfect place to brew the potion. Anyway, we took the potion, and Hermione refused to come out afterwards, telling us just to go. We only had an hour, so me and Ron went down to the corridor where we knew the Slytherin Common Room was and luckily enough someone was there to open it for us.”

“You infiltrated Slytherin in second year! I don’t believe it! You are so lucky no one found out.”

“Well we thought you nearly did. You and Pansy were over near the fire place, and we went over. Eventually you started talking about all the attacks.”

Malfoy's eyes lit up. "You know, I think I remember the night you're talking about. You asked if I knew who it was, and I said I wish I did, because then I could help them."

Harry nodded, smiling. "Yup, at that point we started changing back. That's when Ron faked having a stomach ache and we left. We went back up to the bathroom and Hermione finally showed us her face."

Malfoy was shaking his head with an expression of amusement crossed with bemusement on his face.

"I will never again trust my housemates... you've destroyed any illusions I had about Crabbe and Goyle being a couple of innocent idiots."

Harry laughed at Malfoy's woeful expression. "Ah, well. Just don't tell Snape we had to er... borrow some of his ingredients."

"What! You stole stuff from Snape?"

"Technically it was Hermione..."

"Granger? Ha! The prefect isn't so innocent after all."

"You'd be surprised what Hermione can get up to. We needed Boomslang skin, so I created a distraction by throwing a firework in a cauldron, and Hermione slipped in to Snape's cupboard and took some. She left some coins though. I think she would have felt too guilty otherwise."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. "By the way Malfoy, if Snape finds out about this..."

"I remember the rule, Potter. What happens in the chamber stays in the chamber."

...



Later that night when Harry was sure the Gryffindor Common Room would be empty, Harry and Malfoy crept up the inclined tunnel that led to the Gryffindor quarter of the castle. They came to the -

stair case and Harry turned to Malfoy. "You need to be quiet in case anyone is up. Let me go up first and see, alright?"

Malfoy nodded as Harry turned and looked up at wooden panelling. "Open," he hissed, but nothing happened. Then he noticed straight line about fifteen cm long that ran down the middle of the panelling. Remembering what Malfoy had told him, he reached up and stroked the depression. As soon as he pulled his hand away, the wood began to fade away, and Harry hurried up the stairs, peeking cautiously over the floor. The common room was dark, the fireplace nearly burned out and throwing only dark shadows around the room. Not seeing anybody, Harry beckoned to Malfoy and took the last few steps up onto the landing.

As soon as Malfoy had stepped up next to him, the floor faded back, resuming the appearance of solid wood.

"I found it from the air. I'd never have noticed it otherwise, but the wood patterns here form the image of a snake. Can you see it?" Harry whispered, pointing with his foot along the line of the snake. Malfoy turned his head this way and that, squinting in the darkness. "I suppose... I guess it looks better from the air."

"Yeah, it does." He turned to look out over the common room and spread his arms. "So, what do you think?"

Malfoy moved to stand next to him. "Hard to tell in the dark," he said, shrugging noncommittally.

Harry rolled his eyes. "You would never admit it even if you did like it, would you?"

Malfoy smirked. "Probably not."

They descended the stairs and walked over to the fire, taking seats. Harry pointed out one of the comfy ones to Malfoy who sat down looking distinctly uneasy. "Relax, Malfoy. No one's going to see you."

"Easy for you to say, Potter. There were no students here when you came to my common room. It will completely ruin my reputation to be seen in here."

"I'm not so sure about that you know. Most likely everyone will want to know how you got in. Your housemates will be falling all over themselves to congratulate you on infiltrating Gryffindor's domain."

Malfoy paused thoughtfully, a slow smile spreading across his face. "You could be right. Maybe it would be beneficial to let some little first year see me here. Not with you of course."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You should probably go now. I want to get some sleep."

Malfoy agreed, and they stood. Harry was about to lead Malfoy over to the portrait hole when it suddenly opened. Harry pulled Malfoy down behind the lounge as giggling voices reached their ears. Thankfully, the voices went straight to their dormitories, and they heard the doors closing up on the landing. "Maybe you shouldn't go that way. I can open the entrance to the chamber and you can go -

back through the tunnel to the Slytherin Common Room. Malfoy nodded. "Alright. Wouldn't do to be caught by Filch at this time of night."

They went back up the stairs and stood on the landing. "Listen, after Ancient Runes tomorrow, do you want to go down to the chamber?"

Malfoy hesitated a second before nodding.

"Alright then. Seeya tomorrow," said Harry.

Suddenly, the portrait hole opened again and Harry heard voices, but could see no one. Suddenly, he realised it was Ron and Hermione, and they were beneath his invisibility cloak.

“Where d’you think he could be?”

“I don’t know. I just hope nothing’s happened to him. Maybe we should go and see Dumbledore.”

“You’re right. Hang on though; let me check the map once more.”

“Shite, come on Malfoy! You have to get out of here!” hissed Harry. Pushing Malfoy towards where the entrance was and desperately hoping that his two friends couldn’t see him.

“What’s wrong? Who’s down there?”

“Just hurry!”

“Herm...” came Ron’s confused voice from near the portrait hole.

“What?”

“The map says Harry’s up there.”

“Oh, thank goodness! I was so worried... Ron? What’s wrong?”

Harry opened the entrance, hissing the password as quietly as he could and pushed Malfoy down the stairs just as Ron said, “It says he’s with Malfoy.”

“What? Give me that! ...What in the wor-“

“What?”

“He’s gone!”

“Harry’s gone?!”

“No, Malfoy is. He just... disappeared.”

“You mean he apparated?”

“Of course he didn’t! Haven’t you ever read Hogwarts, A History? You can’t apparate or disapparate on school grounds!”

“How did he do it then?”

-

“I’ve got no idea...”

Harry walked as quickly and quietly as he could to his dormitory, closing the door quietly. He wasn’t sure how he was going to explain this, but he didn’t even feel like trying right now. He most definitely couldn’t explain Malfoy being there, and if he pretended he hadn’t been up either, perhaps they would dismiss it as some accident on the map. He just hoped they hadn’t seen him walk into his dorm...

A few minutes later, the door opened and Harry heard Ron putting the cloak and map away.

“Harry?... Harry?”

Harry feigned sleep when Ron pulled back his curtains, and Ron gave up, moving over to his own bed. Deciding to worry about explaining tomorrow, Harry snuggled into his blankets and fell asleep.

oOo

The next morning, Ron waited until Hermione had arrived to accompany them to breakfast before he said anything. “Harry, we wanted to ask you something.”

“Mmm.”

“Er... where were you last night? Me and Mione were really worried.”

“Oh, sorry guys. I was in the library working on that transfiguration essay and I fell asleep. It was pretty late when I got back here. I’m lucky Filch didn’t catch me.”

“Did you er... have company when you came back?”

Harry gave Hermione what he hoped was a puzzled look, and saw Ron rolling his eyes. "No, why."

"I told you, Hermione."

"Told her what?"

"You see, last night we went looking for you. We took the cloak and map. We were getting really worried cos we couldn't find you anywhere on it. Then, when we got back to the Tower, we were going to go and see Dumbledore, but we decided to take one last look at the map."

Hermione took over the tale. "We saw you on it; you were up near the dorms, but you were with someone."

"What, Nev or Dean or someone?"

"No, it was... well it was Malfoy."

Harry raised an eyebrow and forced a laugh. "Malfoy. In the Gryffindor dorms? I'll believe that when I see it. He would probably have an aneurysm if he saw all that red and gold."

"So you didn't see him?"

Harry shook his head. "Are you sure. I find it difficult to believe he was in there."

-

"I saw his name too, Harry."

"The weird thing is though," continued Hermione, "is that he just suddenly disappeared, and after that he wasn't anywhere on the map."

Harry quelled a grin. "You think he disappeared?"

He could have laughed at the expression of frustration on Hermione's face, but bit his tongue to stop it.

"You can't apparate or disapparate within the grounds," Hermione ground out with forced calmness. 'She's going to snap one of these days,' thought Harry.

"Weird. Maybe it was just a strange mistake with the map."

"I just think it's strange that Malfoy appeared to be in Gryffindor Tower and then disappeared off the map altogether," said Hermione. "Do you think we should go to Dumbledore?"

That was not what Harry wanted. "Hermione, like you said apparating here is impossible. There are a hundred wards around this place. Besides, why would Malfoy be in Gryffindor Tower anyway?"

"Maybe he was on some mission for You-Know-Who!" said Ron.

"Yeah right. Malfoy isn't a Death Eater, Ron."

"How do you know Harry? For all we know, he could be."

"Look guys, it is really too early in the morning to be discussing this. Could we please just go and have breakfast?"

Ron was easily distracted by that topic, and eagerly took a seat at the table. Hermione clearly wanted to pursue the issue, but Harry finally convinced her to drop it. "Let's just wait and see, Mione. You'll see, it'll turn out to be nothing."

oOo

Harry hung around outside the Ancient Runes classroom until Malfoy appeared, then followed the Slytherin at healthy distance to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. In the chamber, they sat on the emerald lounge, admiring the view out of the huge window. "What happened last night, anyway?" asked Malfoy.

“Hermione and Ron went looking for me. That was them that came in second, when I told you you had to go quick. They were under the invisibility cloak – that’s why we couldn’t see them.”

“I still don’t appreciate the way you practically pushed me down the stairs. I bruised my shin.”

“Oh, poor little Draco, do you need a band aid?”

“A what?”

“Never mind. The reason I had to get rid of you so quick was because they knew you were there.”

“It was pretty dark, how did they see us up there?”

“They didn’t see us, at least not that way. When I was in third year, Fred and George gave me this map. Hermione and Ron had it – that’s how they knew we were there.”

“I remember Weasley saying he was going to check the map. How would it tell them we were there though?”

“It’s a special map of Hogwarts. It shows where everyone in the castle is.”

“What!? You mean you could look at it and see where I am at any time?”

Harry shrugged. “Pretty much.”

“Well what did you tell Weasley and Granger?”

“I told them you weren’t in there. Besides, you disappeared as soon as you went down the tunnel, which is lucky.”

“How could I have disappeared off the map?”

“The people who made it wouldn’t have known the tunnel was there. They didn’t plot it, so to anyone reading the map, it doesn’t exist. Anyone looking at the map right now wouldn’t see us on it.”

“This map sounds interesting. Can I see it?”

“I could bring it along some time, I guess. We have to be careful though, Ron and Hermione, especially, are getting suspicious. They don’t know how you just managed to disappear like that. I told them there was probably just some malfunction with the map, but they looked for you and couldn’t find you anywhere, so now they think something is up.”

“Does it really matter?”

“It might if they go to Dumbledore. They don’t trust you, and if they think you were up to something bad, they’re bound to tell.”

“Well you need to convince them nothing is wrong!”

“Don’t worry, I’m trying.”

oOo

On Tuesday, Harry went down to breakfast with Ron and Hermione. Ron and Hermione kept exchanging glances, and Harry, growing more and more frustrated with each look finally burst out; “What’s wrong with you two? Has something happened?”

“No everything’s alright. It’s just... we’re worried about you Harry.”

Harry looked across the table to where Ron was nodding in agreement to Hermione’s statement.

“Why? I’m fine.”

-

“It’s the way you keep disappearing, mate. We don’t know where you go for hours on end. You need to spend more time with your friends.”



"I spend plenty of time with you guys."

"No you don't, not really. You go off by yourself, you say you've been in the library, but we go there to look for you and never find you. We understand if you need time alone, but it isn't good to withdraw away from everyone."

"Believe me guys- I'm fine. There's nothing to worry about. Like you said, everyone needs time alone."

"Well... if you ever need to talk Harry, you know we're both here."

Harry smiled reassuringly and nodded. "I know."

...

After transfiguration, Harry and Hermione went to the dungeons for potions. Malfoy was already there, and Harry walked over to the painting of Serenius Mobrey and his potions lab. "I still can't believe you guessed it the other week, Harry! That was so good."

Harry grinned at her. Just wait.

He looked over at Malfoy and gave an almost imperceptible jerk of his head in the direction of the painting. Malfoy took the hint and wandered over, Pansy clinging to one arm and Goyle tailing them.

Harry turned to the painting. "Serenius, what's that you're brewing?"

Serenius stuck his nose in the air and said nothing.

Malfoy spoke. "It wouldn't be a highly complex shape-shifting potion, would it?"

Harry turned to Malfoy. "You know, I've read about one of those. In a book called 'Moste Potente Potions.' Have you read that one Serenius?" Beside him, Hermione gasped and put a hand over her mouth.

Mobrey was eyeing them warily, and Malfoy spoke again. "Does it require lacewings and boomslang skin?"

"I bet that potion's a really foul tasting one, isn't it?" added Harry.

"Have you stewed it for a month yet?" asked Malfoy.

At that point, Serenius threw down his mixing spoon and crossed his arms huffily, a scowl upon his face. "If you know what the bloody potion is just say it!"

Malfoy smirked. "Sometimes known as the Chameleonis Mophorius."

"Better known as Polyjuice Potion," finished Harry.

-

Serenius Mobrey slammed a hand flat on the bench. "How could you have possibly guessed so soon? I hid the ingredients and everything!"

"Just a lucky guess," replied Harry, amused at Mobrey's indignation.

"That was more than a lucky guess, Harry," said Hermione.

"Yes, it was." Snape's smooth voice cut through the air, and the class turned to face him.

"How is it that someone who has shown such abysmal talent for potions is suddenly able to guess two potions in a row?"

Harry shrugged. "I always thought Malfoy was rather good at potions."

Seamus snickered, and Snape glared, looking suspiciously between Harry and Malfoy. "Well, I suppose it is tradition. Thirty points to each of you, then." Snape turned and walked in to the lab, the class scurrying after them. Harry avoided Hermione's gaze; she was giving him strange looks.

oOo

That week in defence, they were beginning the official competition after their two practice weeks of team strategy. Snape began by giving the class instructions. "Choose your partner wisely. Marks will be accorded depending on the success of the team, not the individual. The winning team will receive the highest mark, with the team that does the worst receiving the lowest. That is not to say the lower scoring teams will fail, as I will be assessing your technique and the strategies you use, as well as your practical performance. The mark you receive for this will be worth thirty percent of your final grade. I will now give you five minutes to find a partner. When you have chosen, come to me so I can put your names down."

The class scrambled to find partners. Harry immediately turned to Ron, but the redhead was already agreeing to go with Hermione.

Ron and Hermione looked at him apologetically. "Harry, you go with Seamus."

"He's with Dean."

"Ask Nev-"

"Potter's with me Weasley," came Malfoy's imperious tone. The Slytherin had appeared at Harry's shoulder.

"What?" said Harry, as Ron snorted.

"As if Malfoy!" scoffed Ron.

"Why do you care, Weasley? You're with Granger." He turned to Harry. "Come on, Potter. I'm in this for the points – no one can beat us."

"Harry doesn't want to go with you!"

"I don't really care what he wants. Nearly everyone else is paired up, anyway. What's your answer Potter?"

Harry looked from Ron's slightly red face to Malfoy's slightly impatient, expectant gaze.

"Er..."

"Er... Draco?" It was Nott, clearly thinking that he had been going to partner with Malfoy.

"Theodore?"

"You coming or what?"

Malfoy turned and raised an eyebrow at Harry. "Well, am I?"

Harry cast what he hoped was a calming look at Ron before turning to Malfoy. "Fine, let's go."

"Wha-!? Harry!"

Harry turned back to Ron and shrugged. "We did do well that first week. Defence is my best subject and I'd like it to stay that way. Having my biggest threat on my team is the best way to do that."

Malfoy clapped his hands and rubbed them together, pleased. "Right then." He turned to Nott. "Theo, you'll have to find someone else."

"But I thought... who are you with?"

"Potter."

Nott blinked several times, frowning. "You. Are with... Potter?"

-

"That's what I said, Theo. I do believe Blaise is still free, but he won't be for long."

Nott continued to look bewildered for a moment before turning to find Zabini.

“Come on Potter, we need to tell Professor Snape.”

Harry shrugged at Ron’s perplexed and sour expression as the four walked over to give Snape their names.

“Weasley, you are with Potter?”

“No sir. Me ‘n Hermione are partners.”

“Weasley, Granger...” repeated Snape, writing the names down.

“Draco, who are you partnering with?”

“Potter, sir.”

Snape froze in the middle of writing down Malfoy’s name and looked disbelievingly between Harry and Malfoy. “What?”

“I’m with Potter.”

Snape looked unsure of what to say before shaking his head slightly and writing ‘Potter’ next to ‘Malfoy’. “Are you quite sure you want to commit to this particular partnership? I’m not sure it is a good idea.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s supposed to be about strategy, isn’t it? As I said to Ron, Malfoy is my biggest threat. He can’t beat me if he’s on my team.”

“Don’t take all the credit, Potter. It was my idea.”

Snape gazed at them appraisingly, a small smirk appearing on his face. He nodded. “Very well. See to it that I don’t regret allowing this pairing.”

oOo

Hey guys, for anyone who wants to know, at this point in the story it’s the beginning of February. I wasn’t really sure what I thought about this chapter. Hope it didn’t seem badly written or disjointed or anything...

## REVIEWERS:

Fhippogriff: Hey! Yeah, I guess Dumbledore can't see through cloaks in this story. Of course, he had no idea Harry was even in the painting, so he wasn't really looking either. So, who knows? Maybe he can. :)

Akuma-chan0326: Glad you like it. Thanks for reviewing. Please keep R&R'ing. : )

Voldemort is Dead: Hehe, thanks. Thanks for another review :)

Jensindenial3516: No worries! Thanks for the review.

## Payback

Harry had been looking forward to sleeping in on Saturday morning. Unfortunately, it was not to be.

"Harry... Harry! Wake up!" Ron was roughly shaking him and Harry groaned as he opened his eyes to look at the boy.

"Wazzit Ron?" he said, yawning.

"You have to come down to the common room! I can't believe it! Sodding Slytherins!"

Ron raced out of the room and Harry sat up, frowning at Ron's behaviour. Curious at what had Ron so worked up, Harry pulled on pants and a shirt and left the dormitory, finding Ron standing with Hermione on the balcony. Nearly everyone in the common room was either conversing angrily or scowling up at the ceiling. Harry followed their gaze as murderous mutterings swept the room and his mouth dropped open.

High up on the ceiling, stretched the whole way across the length of the tower was a huge emerald green banner, adorned with an elegant, curling script that Harry recognised at once.

Malfoy's handwriting adorned the banner, the words 'Slytherins rule' embossed in silver on the fabric, along with a huge, curling snake.

"Those stinking Slytherins!" roared Ron, turning to Harry. "I bet that's why Malfoy was up here the other night; he was planning this!" Ron waved his arm at the offensive decoration.

"Calm down, Ron," scolded Hermione, who had been waving her wand at the banner, muttering spell after spell in an attempt to unstick it from the ceiling.

"How can you tell me to calm down!? Gryffindor will never live this down! By morning tea, everyone is going to know that Slytherin infiltrated Gryffindor!"

“Just in case you don’t remember Ron, you and I have been in the Slytherin common room.”

“Yeah, but no one knew, so it doesn’t matter. This is... it’s...” Ron seemed lost for words, his face red as he scowled up at the banner.

Harry clapped Ron on the back. “Don’t worry, mate. We’ll get ‘em back, and McGonagall will get rid of this in an instant.”

“That’s right, Ron,” agreed Hermione. “Except for the getting back part. Don’t go doing anything silly. I just wish I could work out what spell they used to put it up there. I’ve tried everything I can think of to get it down.”

“Why don’t we go and get some breakfast,” suggested Harry.

-

Harry noticed Ron cheer slightly at the proposal, and Harry let him lead the way out of the portrait hole, giving one last scowl at the emerald banner.

As they entered the hall, Harry’s eyes went to the Slytherin table, seeking out a certain blonde-haired prefect. He found Malfoy, and as they locked eyes, Malfoy gave a sly smirk and a wink.

Beside him, Ron gave a strangled gasp. “Did you see that! He winked! Winked! The stinking ferret.” The redhead was now grinding his fist into his hand, and Harry and Hermione each took an elbow leading him to sit down.

“Well, he certainly does look more satisfied with himself than usual doesn’t he,” commented Hermione, sniffing daintily.

“Bloody gits, I bet they’re all having a good old laugh at our expense.”

Harry shoved a bowl of porridge in front of Ron to shut him up.

...



Later that day, Harry was browsing the shelves in the school library where he was working on charms with Hermione when he spotted Malfoy in the next row.

“I can’t believe you did that!”

Malfoy smirked. “Have you got it down yet?”

“McGonagall and Flitwick are doing it now. Even Hermione couldn’t work out the charms you used to stick it up there.”

A satisfied smirk crept over Malfoy’s face.

“At least they won’t think I was up to something wicked. There’s no nefarious plot to abduct Harry Potter while he sleeps.

Harry’s eyes widened in surprise. “You did that to deflect suspicion?”

Malfoy shrugged jauntily. “Only one of several reasons. I am now a god among my people.” He spread his hands and flashed a brilliant grin.

Harry rolled his eyes. “I hope you know that there will be payback. Ron was practically rabid this morning, and he wasn’t the only one.”

“Ha, I can just imagine the Weasel’s face when he saw it.”

oOo

Late in the night, Azkaban Prison was attacked. Harry heard the news along with the other students at breakfast that morning. He, Hermione and Ron walked in to find the Great Hall full of rustling newspapers and frightened conversation. At the head table, the teachers were gathered in small groups, whispering frantically. Exchanging worried glances, they rushed over to the Gryffindor table and picked up a newspaper.

-

“YOU-KNOW-WHO TAKES AZKABAN - DEMENTORS DEFECT”

In a shock attack late last night, You-Know-Who and his league of Death Eaters stormed Azkaban Prison, killing Ministry guards and Aurors and releasing an as yet undetermined number of Death Eaters.

Compounding matters, the Dementors of Azkaban have departed from Ministry control, apparently joining the ranks of You-Know-Who.

Azkaban was considered one of the most secure sites in wizarding Britain, and there are now fears that the Death Eaters and their Lord may make an assault on other wizarding establishments.

The attack is the largest public statement made by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named since his return last June when the Ministry of Magic was attacked.

The Office of Magical Law Enforcement released a statement ensuring immediate action to detain the released Death Eaters and regain the services of the dementors.

Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge was unreachable for comment.

"This is terrible!" moaned Hermione.

"Who knows how many of them will still be sane enough to function, though?" said Harry. "Except for the ones who were at the Ministry last year, most of them have been in there since Voldemort's first rising."

"I'd be more worried about what the insane ones will be capable of."

...

That night, Harry was fairly certain there would be an Order meeting, and after dinner he took his invisibility cloak and made his way through the waterfall painting and into Grimmauld Place. He settled himself down once again in the window of the barn and was rewarded when very shortly the kitchen was filled with witches and wizards. There were fewer than the last meeting he had been too, probably because this gathering was an emergency meeting.

As soon as Dumbledore entered the room, followed by McGonagall and Snape, he was assaulted with questions by the people in the room.

The grey wizard held up a hand for silence and the room gradually settled into a strained and expectant silence.

“As you have all heard, the attack we feared has come to pass, much sooner than any of us expected. Severus, if you would...” Dumbledore motioned to Snape, who spoke.

“Around seventy Death Eaters were released from Azkaban, ten of which the Dark Lord killed because they were no longer capable of intelligent thought or spoke against him. Of the remaining followers, most of their minds have degenerated to some point. As such they are highly unbalanced and unpredictable. They have become fanatics to his cause, desiring nothing more than to seek revenge on those who imprisoned them. I doubt they will be seen in action for a while, given that they are very weak after having been in Azkaban for up to sixteen years. Still, it is a huge blow to our -

campaign. Once they are returned to full physical health we will be in a significant amount of trouble.”

A short man with a crude accent spoke up. “I thought you were supposed to be providing us with the information to stop these sorts of things from happening.”

Snape fixed the man with a condescending stare. “I knew he was planning it, though I did not expect it to be so soon.”

“I was under the impression you considered yourself one of his most trusted followers. How could you not have known when the attack was to take place?”

Snape sneered at the man. “All I know is that last night we were summoned and told that was the night we would be storming Azkaban. I assure you everyone else was as surprised as I was at the sudden announcement. There was no chance for me to warn the Order.”

“For all you claim to be loyal to the Order, you don’t always do such a good job of keeping us informed.” There were several mummings of agreement around the kitchen.

“If you are suggesting I am not loyal-“

“Enough!” said Dumbledore sternly. “I trust Severus implicitly, as you all know. Sometimes things happen that we cannot plan for. We need to support each other rather than assigning blame where it is not warranted. Severus, please continue.”

Snape glared around the room before continuing. “In addition to securing his followers, he has gained the allegiance of the dementors. I do not know what he has planned for them, but no doubt he has promised them souls in return for their services. I would suggest that people who do not already know how, very quickly learn to conjure a patronus.” Snape glanced at Dumbledore to indicate that he was finished and Dumbledore nodded.

“Thank you. Severus is quite right. The patronus is your only defence against the dementors, so learn it. If those that know it could help others, that would be much appreciated. Now, to other business. We need to talk about protecting Harry Potter.”

“Dumbledore, I know he did us all a favour all those years ago, but do we really need to assign him some protection? We’re spread thinly as it is, without protecting every individual that You-Know-Who might target.”

McGonagall and Snape exchanged a glance. It seemed McGonagall was in on the prophecy as well. Dumbledore replied, “Harry is a special case. I must stress the importance of keeping him safe.”

A member of the crowd spoke up. “What about the rest of the children at the school? They are all in just as much danger.”

“Perhaps we could send an auror or two to guard the school. I have no problem with that. Especially now that the dementors have joined You-Know-Who, we don’t want to take any risks with our children,”

replied Kingsley Shacklebolt. "Of course, it shouldn't be too hard to convince the Minister of the need to protect the school. The Ministry is looking for somewhere they can publicly -

demonstrate that they are doing something to keep the community safe. I shall suggest posting Aurors who are in the Order, perhaps Owens and Mulgrave?"

Murmurs of agreement ran through the group and Dumbledore bowed his head in acknowledgement. "Very well. Kingsley, if you would accompany me to Hogwarts after the meeting, perhaps we could discuss positioning an Auror or two at the school."

Kingsley nodded assent and the meeting turned to the problem of tracking down Voldemort's stronghold.

oOo

On Monday morning as they were eating breakfast Dumbledore announced the posting of two Ministry Aurors at the school. The first was Mulgrave, the one from the Order. He was a tall, stately looking man with thick black hair and a piercing gaze. The other was Fitzgerald, a short Irish fellow with a cheerful grin and friendly appearance. Harry was unsure if he was in the Order as well, or just a Ministry employee.

"To ensure the safety of students, Aurors Mulgrave and Fitzgerald will be patrolling the castle and grounds," explained Dumbledore. "Please be respectful of their presence as they are here to protect you. They will also accompany students third year and above on the Hogsmeade visit next weekend."

Excited whispers broke out at the announcement of another Hogsmeade weekend.

"Excellent," said Ron once Dumbledore had resumed his seat. "I really need to stock up my lolly stash."

oOo

After lunch the next day, Harry and Malfoy were once again down in the chamber. Malfoy was reading and Harry was working on his Ancient Runes essay, occasionally throwing a question at the Slytherin. After a while Harry grew tired of writing and put his quill away.

“Have you decided if you’ll teach me Occlumency?”

Malfoy looked up from his book, chewing his bottom lip. “Yes. I’ve decided I will, but only because it’s going to help my Legilimency training.”

‘Trust Malfoy to only do something because it benefits him’, thought Harry. “Great! Can we start tonight?”

Malfoy spared a last glance at his book before closing it and placing it on the low table in front of the lounge. Salz slithered down from her branch to investigate the book.

“I have one condition.”

“What?”

-

“You can’t tell anyone about me learning Legilimency or that I know Occlumency. It could cause... problems for me.”

“You know I won’t. I remember the rule. Besides, I don’t want anyone else to know either.”

“I want you to swear it.”

Harry pondered for a second. He couldn’t see any danger in making a promise. If Malfoy didn’t want anyone else to know, he had no problem with it.”

“I don’t think it’s necessary, but all right. Perhaps we could just make the rule formal? I, Harry Potter do hereby swear not to tell a soul that Draco Malfoy is teaching me Occlumency or learning Legilimency.

From this moment on, knowledge of any events that occur within the Chamber of Secrets shall remain within the Chamber.”

Malfoy held out his hand and Harry took it. He was surprised when Malfoy spoke. “And I, Draco Malfoy do also swear that no soul shall learn of any events that occur within the walls of the Chamber.”

Malfoy tapped his wand to Harry’s hand, and a green flame shot out, twining around their clasped hands. He motioned for Harry to do the same. Harry took out his wand and touched it to Malfoy’s hand. This time, a red flame shot out. When it was complete, both flames disappeared and Malfoy disengaged his hand.

“It’s done.”

Harry shook his hand. There was a strange tingling sensation permeating upwards through his arm, eventually filling his whole body. He shook his body, trying to dispel the feeling.

Malfoy must have felt it too, because he gave a little shiver.

“Weird,” muttered Harry.

“Yeah...”

“So... can we start now?”

“Alright. Make yourself comfortable and sit facing me.”

Harry did as Malfoy said, and they sat facing each other on the lounge, legs crossed.

“I’m going to enter your mind. It requires eye contact. At first, I just want you to try and feel me in your mind. It shouldn’t be too hard, as I’m not yet very good at Legilimency. When you do, focus on what you think is me. You might choose to imagine me, walking around in your mind, or maybe I’m just a presence that you can’t see. For me, it was easier to visualise something more ‘physical’ that I could push out, rather than some invisible force.”

Harry nodded, already slipping into his meditative breathing. In his lesson with Snape yesterday, Snape had said how the wall was stronger if he imagined actually building it, rather than just imagining it was there. After that they had moved on to some different barriers that Snape -

suggested. Amongst them were fire, a maze, a forest, an ocean, and darkness. He had experienced varying success with each.

Tonight, he decided he would try darkness again, when he realised Malfoy hadn't said anything about a barrier. "I was reading a book that said you should envision some kind of a barrier. Should I do that?"

"Not yet. First I just want you to see what it's like having someone else in your consciousness. Once we've done that, we can move on to creating a barrier."

It sounded reasonable to Harry, so he settled down into the breathing again as Malfoy looked him straight in the eyes. "Legilimens."

Harry's first thought as Malfoy invaded his mind was that he had not been exaggerating when he'd said he wasn't very good at Legilimency. It wasn't painful, but Harry was shockingly aware that there was someone other than himself in his head, and that it was Malfoy.

His second thought (one that was somewhat disturbing) was that compared to Malfoy, Snape's presence was gentle, like a calm breeze caressing his mind rather than a herd of rampaging hippogriffs.

Malfoy also had far less control than Snape. While the Potions Master could slow Harry's thoughts down to view one at a time, and peruse them at will, Malfoy hurtled through the memories, unable to grab and hold on to any. Harry desperately hoped Malfoy knew how to pull out. He wasn't sure he could push Malfoy out.

Suddenly, the presence was gone from his mind.

"Well, there's no chance I could miss that!" Harry blurted.



"I told you I wasn't very good yet. I have only been learning this year. We've really only covered actually penetrating someone's mind, not controlling myself once I'm in there."

"How did you stop it?"

"That part is even more difficult than getting in, but Snape made me practice until I could do it perfectly. It wouldn't do for me to unwittingly engage someone, which is very easy for a student of Legilimency, and then not be able to get out. I've actually caught flashes now and then of what people are thinking. Just things like 'Got charms now' and that sort of thing. It's weird when these thoughts pop into your head and you don't know where they're from."

"I can imagine."

"Well, now that you know what that is like I suppose we could try the barrier. Have you ever meditated before?"

"Yeah, I know how."

-

"Good, that will help. You need to find a comfortable breathing pattern and envision the barrier in your mind. You need to put all your thoughts and memories inside the barrier, and keep me out. This is where the way you imagine me in your mind comes in to play. I think of myself as smoke."

Harry snorted. "Didn't feel like smoke."

"Shut up, Potter. I'm doing you a favour here, so don't insult me," said Malfoy, though his tone was light.

"If your barrier is a wall for example, I can just float up over it, or maybe find a way in through a crack. If you imagine me as a person, I can't do those things – I'll be forced to find another, more difficult way. If you imagine me as a person however, I'll just imagine myself as smoke, and I'll change. That's where practice comes into it. When

you first start, your mind is relatively weak. The more control you gain over your mind, the harder it will be for me to change. Get it?"

Harry nodded. He had been through things similar to that with Snape.

"Because I already know Occlumency, my mind is most likely stronger than yours. I'll try not to be too aggressive at first, but because my Legilimency isn't very good, I don't have too much control. Ready? I'm going to give both of us a minute to prepare, then I'll try and enter your mind slowly. Then, you just need to keep me away from your memories."

They sat quietly for a minute, and then Harry felt Malfoy's presence in his mind again. It wasn't quite as fast as the first time, but it wasn't slow either. Tonight, Harry had chosen darkness as his barrier. It wasn't physical, but it permeated the deepest recesses of his mind. The first time he had imagined darkness, he had thought of his cupboard at the Dursleys. It was a depressing place, but it had been his, a place where no one else had ever gone. When he had done it with Snape, the man had simply opened the cupboard door. After that, Harry had kept the image of darkness he experienced in the cupboard, but remembered how much darker it was when he closed his eyes. Now, there was no door, just the security he felt in his own little space. Snape had simply conjured a torch. This time however, Harry imagined the darkness to be impenetrable. There were no walls keeping the sunlight out, no windows to be opened. The darkness simply was. He imagined it was something like the darkness caused by the Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder that Fred and George had started selling in their joke shop. Not even a torch or lumos could penetrate that.

He could imagine Malfoy now, hurtling through darkness, and was taken aback when he felt Malfoy's surprise. Satisfied that for now Malfoy couldn't see anything, Harry concentrated on banishing the Slytherin presence from his mind.

A few minutes later, Malfoy pulled out. Neither of them had been getting anywhere, though Malfoy hadn't been able to sense any of Harry's thoughts. "That was better than I thought for your first try."

Harry shrugged. "I've been practicing on my own a little bit... I could feel what you felt. Why is that?"

Malfoy shrugged. I suppose it's because I'm not good enough at controlling my emotions yet. It should have only been quite faint."

"Yeah, it was. How long has Snape been teaching you this?"

-

"He started teaching me the basics of Occlumency when I was quite young, but I really only got serious about it in the last few years. I only started Legilimency about six months ago."

"Well, hopefully it doesn't take me too long to get a basic grasp on Occlumency so I can get my book back."

oOo

That night brought with it an unexpected occurrence. Dumbledore stood and clapped his hands to gain everyone's attention. "If I could tear you away from your sausages and eggs for a moment, I have an announcement to make."

Silence descended upon the school and Dumbledore spoke again. "Today we welcome to the school a new student. She is transferring from Freilie's Academy of Magic into her sixth year here at Hogwarts, and will be with us for the remainder of her time at school. In light of the occasion we shall have an impromptu sorting."

Excited whispering broke out in the Hall. They had never had a student transfer in the middle of term before, just a few who would turn up at the beginning of the year.

The headmaster nodded to Professor McGonagall who was standing off to the side with a stool and the sorting hat. Next to her was a tall tanned girl with brown hair and blue eyes. At Dumbledore's nod, McGonagall placed the stool in the middle of the Hall and placed the hat upon it.

"I introduce to you Pandora Noksmyth," said Dumbledore loudly, and the tall girl walked over to the sorting hat, placing it on her head. The hat fell to just below her eyes, and it wasn't long before the brim of the hat opened wide and yelled "GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry clapped along with the rest of his table as the girl took a seat at the end closest to the head table, smiling and shaking hands with the people around her.

"Wonder why she transferred, eh Harry? It's not usual to change schools in the middle of the year," said Ron.

Harry shrugged, glancing briefly down the table. To be quite honest, he didn't really care too much.

"You know we got a fair few new students besides first years this year. People just want their kids to be closer to home or somewhere safer. Maybe that's why." It was true, at the sorting there had been about twenty-five students sorted into second through seventh year.

"Whatever the reason," said Hermione, "we should ask her to sit with us tomorrow. She'll be in my dorm anyway."

"Great idea Mione!"

Harry looked up at Ron strangely. "Getting a bit excited Ron? I suppose she's not bad looking."

Ron blushed bright red. "I'm just being supportive of the new student. That's what prefects are for!"

-

Harry chuckled at Ron's indignation. "Calm down, I'm just joking. I know you fancy Hermione." Ron blushed again, and Hermione smiled.

Just then, dinner appeared and both boys were very quickly distracted from any conversation by the steaming mounds of potatoes, chips and lamb chops.

...

After dinner, Harry was being caned by Ron in a game of chess when Hermione dragged the new girl over to meet them. "Ron, Harry, this is Pandora Noksmyth."

Harry finished watching as one of his knights was demolished by Ron's queen in a particularly vicious fashion before looking up at the girl and smiling.

She finished shaking Ron's hand and turned to face Harry, who stuck out his hand. "Hi, nice to meet you," he said.

"And you. I can't believe I'm at Hogwarts. I've always wanted to come here, but my parents wanted me to go to Freilie's."

"So why'd you change?"

"Oh, my parents thought it would be safer here. It probably is, I suppose."

Harry privately disagreed with that assessment. He'd never even heard of the school she had gone to. Hogwarts on the other hand was the most prominent school in Britain, and certainly of interest to Voldemort.

To accommodate Hermione and Pandora, they changed their game to exploding snap. As the game went on, Pandora grew more and more boisterous, earning amused glances from students seated around them and thoroughly irritating Harry. He wanted to relax before bed, but was finding it exceedingly difficult to do so with her yelling in his ear.

Ron and Hermione seemed to have no problem with it, however. They happily joined in, and after a while Harry excused himself and went up to his dormitory.

...

For the rest of the week, Hermione brought the new girl to sit with them, which surprised Harry somewhat. New people often found Hermione to be a bit bossy, but she and Pandora seemed to get along like a house on fire. Harry found he quite enjoyed Pandora's company... for short amounts of time. She was very bubbly and outgoing, and easily one of the loudest people Harry had ever met. She was enjoyable to be around, but acted in an overly friendly manner, and after a while that started to grate on his nerves. The day after Pandora arrived, McGonagall presented her with a timetable at breakfast, favouring her with a familiar smile, and Harry wondered briefly if they knew each other. He leaned over to look at her timetable and saw that she shared defence, potions, transfiguration, herbology and charms with him. He felt a bit guilty when his first thought was that he only had two classes without her. She was alright, really, just a bit loud for his tastes.

oOo

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On Friday after breakfast, Harry was stopped on his way out of the hall by Dumbledore. "A quick word, if I may, Harry."

"Yes sir," replied Harry, stepping over to the side with the man.

"I'm afraid I have an unfortunate request to make of you. I believe it would be unwise for you to participate in the Hogsmeade weekend, given the recent escape of prisoners from Azkaban. I'm sure you understand."

Harry barely retained his sarcastic snort. 'Request? Yeah, right!'

"I understand completely sir." There was no point arguing, he knew Dumbledore wouldn't change his mind.

...

After dinner, Harry was sitting with Ron, Hermione and Pandora playing exploding snap.

“All ready for Hogsmeade tomorrow?” asked Ron.

Harry’s scowl deepened. “I’m not allowed to go. Dumbledore said so.”

“What!? But everyone else is going! There are aurors going to be there.”

He still won’t let me go.

“But why just you, Harry?” asked Hermione.

Harry replied with a shrug. There was no way he was going to tell them about the prophecy, especially while Pandora was there. Besides, they’d probably hear it from someone in the Order eventually. “He just doesn’t think it’s safe, given the number of times I’ve already had a run in with Voldemort.”

“Yeah, but that was cos you were in his way. He’s not going to come after you for the sake of it, is he?” said Ron.

“No, I suppose not. Still, Dumbledore thinks I’m safer here. What a load of rubbish. I mean, he let Quirrel in in our first year, and he had Voldemort stuck on the back of his head, there was the basilisk in second year, then he had a Death Eater teach us in fourth year, Umbridge last year, and he thinks I’m safe here!”

“Harry, Dumbledore didn’t let them in. There was nothing he could have done to prevent those things that happened.”

“You’re right Hermione. It’s always been up to me, hasn’t it?”

“Harry, that’s not what I meant.”

“It’s the truth though. In the end, I look after myself. He should realise by now that I’m more than capable of defending myself. He certainly hasn’t done a very good job of it.”

There was a strained silence where no one was quite sure how to reply.

-

"Well, at least you won't be alone, Harry," said Pandora. "Since I just got here, my parents haven't signed a Hogsmeade permission form yet. We can hang out together." She gave a bright smile.

"Yeah, great," said Harry. It must have sounded more than a bit sarcastic because Hermione shot him a look behind Pandora's back.

"Sorry Pandora. I'm just annoyed about being banned from Hogsmeade when no one else is."

She waved his apology aside and they went back to their game.

...

Shortly after, Harry left for his 8:00 astronomy lesson. It was quite chilly up on the tower, and Harry pulled his cloak around him as he set up his telescope. Beside him, Malfoy was already scanning the skies and marking his star chart.

"Going to Hogsmeade tomorrow?"

"Of course."

"I'm not."

"And you feel the need to tell me, why?"

"Just making conversation."

"Potter, I took this class because I liked the peace and quiet, not because I wanted to make idle conversation with Gryffindors."

Harry fell silent and set about marking points of interest on his star chart. As the lesson drew to a close, he packed up his things and was walking down the stone steps from the tower when Malfoy caught up with him.

"So why aren't you going?"



“Feel like talking now, do you?”

“Just making conversation.”

Harry rolled his eyes before replying, “Dumbledore thinks it isn’t safe for me to go.”

“Sucks to be you then.”

“Mm.”

“Why is the Dark Lord so interested in you anyway?”

Harry cast a sidelong glance at the Slytherin, and found he looked genuinely interested. He shrugged. “Why don’t you ask him that.”

“Something tells me that that would not be a wise course of action,” replied the blonde wryly.

oOo

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On Saturday morning Harry bid goodbye to his friends in the dorm without getting out of bed. When he finally got up, they had been gone almost an hour, and he was tempted to grab his invisibility cloak and use the secret tunnel behind the statue of the one-eyed witch to get to Honeydukes and into Hogsmeade. Thinking he might do just that, he opened his trunk and pulled it out.

He felt bad about leaving Pandora alone, but he wasn’t going to miss out on going to Hogsmeade just because Dumbledore didn’t think it was a good idea. After all, if Voldemort was going to attack Hogsmeade, it would happen whether or not he was there.

He opened the door of his dorm and came face to face with Pandora. “Hey, Harry. I was just coming to see if you were up yet. Fancy working on your Defence essay? I was about to start mine.”

“Er... Actually, I was just off to meet someone. Maybe when I get back?”

“Oh, well, I don’t really feel like working anyway. Maybe I could come with you?”

Shite! “I suppose, if you really want to.”

Pandora smiled brightly and bounded along beside him, knocking over a chair on the way out.

It was only as he was closing the portrait hole that he wondered how he would explain when there was no one there to meet them.

His problem was solved however, when he rounded a corner with Pandora on his heels and a person stepped out of the shadows. “Malfoy? I thought you were going to Hogsmeade.”

Malfoy shrugged, casting a disdainful sniff in Pandora’s direction. Luckily, Pandora hadn’t been here long enough to understand the house rivalries, even though Ron had briefed her fully, so she wouldn’t think it was strange that Harry was talking with Malfoy.

“I found I had more productive ways to spend my time. I still might go a bit later. Right now, I was thinking I’d go to the library, if you want to come. Of course, present company considered...” Malfoy indicated with his eyes at Pandora, who scowled.

Harry, thinking it was only polite, decided to introduce them. “Er, Pandora, this is Draco Malfoy. Malfoy, this is Pandora Noksmyth.”

To Harry’s surprise, Pandora scowled at the boy. “Yes, I know who he is. Son of Lucius Malfoy.”

“That’s right. How do you know him?”

“We’ve met,” she replied shortly.

“I see. I’ll be sure to ask him about you.”

Pandora flicked her hair haughtily. "Do."

Malfoy flicked a glance in Harry's direction, then back to Pandora. "Why don't you run along, Noksmyth. I have to talk with Potter for a moment."

"Actually, Harry and I were on our way to meet someone."

-

"And so you have, now it's time for you to go. I'm sure you've got better things to do, maybe work on your defence essay?"

Pandora narrowed her eyes at Malfoy and turned to Harry. "Harry, I don't think you should hang around with this scum."

Harry raised his eyebrows at the girl. She hadn't even been here a week and already she was into the house rivalry thing. "We're not 'hanging around'. I just need to talk to him about... potions. We're partners, you see. I'll meet you back in the common room later. I've got a few other things I need to do too."

"I could wait, I really don't mind."

"No, that's okay. You'll just get bored. Plus I have to go see a teacher. You did say you had that essay to work on."

Pandora appeared extremely put out by Harry's suggestions, but finally relented, glaring suspiciously between Harry and Malfoy. "Well, if you're sure..."

"He's sure, now scram." Malfoy's tone was impatient as he turned and stalked down the corridor. Harry gave a half-hearted wave to Pandora and hurried to catch up with Malfoy.

"Is she always that annoying?"

"She's alright, just a bit excitable. I have to thank you though; there was no way I was going to get rid of her on my own."

“Anytime. Getting rid of pesty Gryffindors is a specialty of mine. So, were you headed to the Chamber?”

“Actually, I was planning on going to Hogsmeade.”

“Really? And what of Dumbledore’s wishes?”

“The more time goes on, the less I find myself agreeing with Dumbledore’s wishes, especially those that regard my life and welfare.”

“Do I sense a note of rebellion, Potter?”

“There’s a difference between rebellion and wanting to be independent.”

“Is there? That’s debatable.”

“Whatever. I don’t feel like debating with you today. Hogsmeade or the chamber?”

“How about the chamber, then Hogsmeade for lunch?”

“Alright. What did you want to do in the chamber?”

“I was hoping to get some basilisk scales actually. To sell at the apothecary in Hogsmeade.”

“Why?”

-

“Unfortunately my funds have become depleted, and I have nothing to spend.”

“Malfoy, you’re the richest student in this school, how could your funds have ‘become depleted?’”

"I don't carry all my gold with me. My parents give me a certain amount to last me the term. It's gone, I need more. Of course, to get more I need your permission."

"My permission?"

Malfoy gave a long sigh. "Technically the basilisk is yours, since you are the one that killed it. Besides, I need you to get me down there."

"Well, I suppose I could spare a few scales. How many did you want?"

"Oh, three would be more than enough. That'll get me more than I need to last a few months, if I'm careful."

"Three?" Three scales would get you enough galleons to last a few months?"

"Potter, you honestly have no idea how desirable those ingredients are. With that whole snake, you're set for life a hundred times over."

"Hmmm... Maybe I could sell some too. I need some money, and I don't have my key."

"Why don't you have your key?"

"Oh, Dumbledore or the Weasleys have it. Not sure which."

"Why on Earth does someone else have your Gringotts key? Are you an idiot?"

"They just usually get money for me on the holidays for school books and things. I don't really get to leave my house much, so they go for me."

"You are an idiot. Giving your key to the Weasleys! Next time you go to Gringotts, your vault will probably be empty! And as for Dumbledore, just a moment ago you were talking about being independent!"

Harry stopped and glared at Malfoy. "First of all, do not insult the Weasleys. They would never steal from me. Second of all, I never gave permission to Dumbledore to have my key. He just seems to think he can control every detail of my life."

Harry turned and strode off. "Well I think you should get your key back. I never let my key leave my neck." Malfoy patted his chest, indicating where his key hung on a fine gold chain.

"Don't worry, I intend to."

"Good. So," asked Malfoy, changing the subject, "How were you planning on getting to Hogsmeade?"

"Invisibility cloak."

Malfoy perked up at that. "Have you got it on you now?"

-

"Yeah, why?"

"Because that Noksmyth chit is following us."

Harry made to turn and look, but Malfoy spoke exasperatedly, "Don't. Turn. Around."

Harry dipped his hand in to his pocket, running his fingers over the silky cloak. As they rounded a corner, he grabbed Malfoy's elbow and pulled forward. The Slytherin growled at the contact and wrenched his arm away, but Harry just jerked his head in the direction he wanted Malfoy to go.

They walked quickly over to a stretch of wall not far away and Harry pulled aside a tapestry that hung on the wall, revealing a secret passage way. Malfoy's eyes widened and they ducked into the passage way. "Let's run," whispered Harry.

They took off at a jog, coming out into a corridor near the transfiguration classroom and stopped to catch their breaths. Faintly,

Harry heard hurried footsteps. "Shite! She must have seen us. Quick, get under!" He pulled out the cloak and flung it over their shoulders, adjusting it so it covered their feet, and they backed into a tiny alcove. Seconds later, Pandora burst through the tapestry, looking in each direction.

"Talk about clingy," muttered Malfoy.

Harry couldn't agree more. The girl's behaviour certainly was odd.

Pandora's face fell when she realised they were gone. "Dammit!" With that, she turned and walked quickly away from them, the sound of her footsteps receding.

Harry turned his head slightly to Malfoy. "Come on. We aren't far from Myrtle's bathroom. Let's keep the cloak on until we get there."

They shuffled forward until they reached their goal, and Harry tucked the cloak safely away. "Let's get this done so we can get to Hogsmeade."

Malfoy nodded agreement and they went quickly into the chamber with the basilisk. Twenty minutes later, they had a small bag holding ten medium sized basilisk scales. Malfoy had ordered that they only take broken or split ones, claiming they would still get a good price for them. "Best to keep the fine ones for ourselves, or to sell later. The broken ones will lose their magic after too long."

Another twenty minutes later found them once again under the cloak and approaching the Whomping Willow. Harry felt it was safe to show Malfoy this secret passage as Pettigrew and therefore Voldemort, already knew about it.

"So this goes to the Shrieking Shack? Huh."

"Yeah, I've used it a few times before."

"Is this the only one that leads to Hogsmeade?" asked Malfoy curiously.

Harry hesitated before answering. "Yes."

-

Malfoy looked at him appraisingly. "Liar."

"I am not."

"Yes you are, I can tell. You're a pathetic liar, actually."

"Well, you did say not to trust you. I'm not so stupid that I'd tell the son of a Death Eater how to get in to Hogwarts."

Malfoy narrowed his eyes, but then nodded. "Well, at least you listened to me. That is information it wouldn't be safe to trust me with."

...

Half an hour later, they were standing in an empty alleyway around the corner from the apothecary.

Malfoy stepped out from under the cloak, but Harry stayed hidden. It wouldn't do for anyone to see him in Hogsmeade, let alone with Draco Malfoy. "Are you going to come in or wait here?"

"I'll come in, but I'm staying under the cloak."

"You'd better. I will not be seen in public with the Boy-Who-Lived."

Harry gestured rudely at Malfoy, safe in the knowledge he was unseen.

As he watched, Malfoy performed some charms on himself. First, his hair became a honey brown colour. Then, he turned his eyes green and lengthened his nose. Lastly, he made his jaw squarer and stuffed his Slytherin tie into his pocket. He looked quite different, so that anyone who didn't see him regularly wouldn't recognise him.

"Where did you learn to do that?!" gasped Harry.



Malfoy smirked arrogantly. "Private study. Although, my father requested I do it. It comes in quite handy. I don't want to be recognised selling these sorts of things."

"Why not?"

"Because, you fool! People would talk, and eventually it would get back to Snape, who frequents this apothecary, that I was selling rare basilisk parts. Since I already gave him a whole lot for Christmas, he's going to wonder where I'm getting it from. Luckily he's let it go for now. Then, Snape or someone else would probably mention it to my father and it might even get back to the Dark Lord then. Would you want that? I cannot lie to him."

Harry was astounded that Malfoy had thought it through so thoroughly. "Good idea then. Let's hurry. I missed breakfast this morning and I want lunch."

Malfoy left the alleyway, Harry walking behind him. They entered the dark apothecary and Malfoy headed straight for the counter.

"What c'n I do for ye?" asked the man who was mixing a potion there.

"I have some stock I think you might be interested in."

-

"Do ye now? Bang it on the coun'er then."

Malfoy removed the little pouch from his robes and opened the drawstring, turning it upside down and tipping the scales into a pile on the counter.

The man leaned over, a careful eye scanning the ingredients. "Snake scales?"

At Malfoy's nod he continued. "Not in grea' condi-shun. I c'n get better stock from my regular supplier."

“Not of this kind you can’t.”

“N why’s that, lad?”

“These aren’t just any snake scales. They’re very rare.”

The man glanced suspiciously at Malfoy before leaning to inspect the scales more carefully.

“Ow rare?”

“Basilisk rare,” replied Malfoy, and the man’s head shot up. “Ye lyin’. ‘Avent seen basilisk stock in two decades. Where’d som’n like you get sum’n like this, kid?” Malfoy said nothing, and the man took a pair of tweezers, picking up one of the scales. He began a detailed inspection of the scale, using several spells and assorted bits of equipment.

When he returned, he appeared quite stunned. “Right, ye are. Basilisk no doubt, n full o’ magic. They’re broken, so they must be fresh. Where’d you get ‘em from, eh?”

“Ask no question and hear no lies, my friend. Are you willing to pay?”

The man pondered for a second, assessing Malfoy. “Ow old are ye?”

“I don’t believe my age is an issue. If you aren’t willing to make a deal there are a hundred other places I could go.”

The man’s eyes widened. “No, no sir. I’ll buy, I’ll buy! Say... ninety galleons?”

Malfoy snorted. “I think not. I may be young, but I am not stupid or inexperienced in these matters. I’ll accept nothing short of... let’s say one fifty, and I’d say you’re still getting the better end of the deal there.”

The man hastened to agree, not wanting to press his incredible luck at obtaining the ingredients, and several minutes later they left the store, Malfoy holding a cheque. They made their way to the local

branch of Gringotts, a small building in the middle of town. Malfoy had resumed his normal appearance. In the bank, Malfoy cashed the cheque and received a heavy bag filled with clinking gold coins which he shrunk and put in his pocket. Then, he turned and walked up the street. Harry followed silently as Malfoy led the way to the Hog's Head.

Inside was practically empty, as was the usual for the seedy pub. Malfoy sat in a corner, ordering a bottle of firewhisky and two glasses. "Sure you don't mind talking to someone who isn't there?" asked Harry jokingly.

-

"Potter, in case you haven't noticed the majority of the clientele at this pub are exactly that sort. No one will think on it a second."

The barkeeper brought their drinks, not batting an eyelid at the fact that Malfoy had asked for two glasses. The cork was popped and the glasses filled. "A toast to our first business deal, Potter."

"Harry grinned and touched his glass to Malfoy's

"So, how much does your business partner receive, Potter?"

"Huh?"

"What's the split? How much of the one hundred and fifty galleons do I get?"

"Oh er, I thought you'd just take what you wanted."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "I told you before, Potter. The basilisk is yours. However, if you insist, I'll take half."

"Fine with me. I wouldn't have even thought of selling parts myself, so you're certainly entitled to what you want."

"You would make a terrible businessman, Potter. You're far too naive."

“Hey, don’t insult me just because I let you take what you wanted.”

“Fine, but you really should learn to be more forceful. You won’t get anywhere being nice.”

“Believe me, I’m beginning to realise that.”

Harry left the Hog’s Head a little merrier than he had arrived and made his way back to the castle, stopping along the way at several shops to spend some of his earnings. Malfoy had gone off to find his Slytherins companions, taking his half with him.

His last stop was Honeydukes, and it was beginning to empty out as students headed back to the school. After dropping a galleon on the counter, Harry slipped out the back and into the cellar, where he opened the hatch and entered the tunnel that would lead him back to Hogwarts.

Not wanting to alert Ron or Hermione that he had been out of the castle, he used the pendant and deposited his purchases in the chamber before apparating to a hidden passageway near the portrait hole that he had used before.

He entered the portrait hole and was immediately ambushed by Hermione. “Harry! Where have you been?”

“Um...I just went for a walk around the castle for a while. Before that I was in the library. Why? What’s wrong?”

“Professor McGonagall is looking for you. No one could find you all day!”

“Well I wasn’t missing. Why were they looking for me?”

Ron entered the conversation. “Pandora said you disappeared this morning. Me’n Mione thought you might have gone to Hogsmeade, but we didn’t see you... did you go?”

“No, I wasn’t allowed, remember? I spent a fun-filled day studying and walking around the castle.”

“Well, you’d better go see the professor. I think she’s quite worried. Pandora said she saw you with Malfoy, and then you disappeared.”

Harry scowled, looking around for the girl. “What does she care if I was with Malfoy?” he hissed quietly.

“Why were you with him, mate?”

“I was talking to him for about five minutes about potions, if that’s alright with you.”

“Pandora said you ran away from her.”

Harry was starting to get annoyed. “What are we, five? And what is with that girl? She was following us. Running was the only way to get rid of her.”

“She’s just looking out for you, Harry,” said Hermione. “I don’t think you should go off with Malfoy alone either, even if it is just to talk about potions.”

“I’m perfectly capable of looking after myself. I don’t need Pandora to do that. What I do is none of her business. What does she even have against Malfoy? And then she goes and tells on us for talking!”

“Don’t worry about it, Harry. Just go and tell McGonagall you’re okay.”

“Fine.”

Harry left the common room and headed for McGonagall’s office. He was thoroughly annoyed with Pandora, and with the teachers. It was like they were tracking his every movement!

He knocked on the office door and went in.

“Mr. Potter, there you are,” said McGonagall, relief in her voice. “Where on earth have you been all day?”

"I slept in for a while, and then Pandora and I went for a short walk. Most of the day I was studying."

"And why is it that nobody could find you?"

Harry shrugged, trying to look puzzled. "I don't know. Who was looking for me?"

"Professor Dumbledore wanted to see you. He was concerned when you didn't appear at breakfast. He thought perhaps you had disobeyed his order for you to stay at school."

"Well I didn't."

"Are you sure about that? This is quite a serious matter. You do realise how dangerous it could be for you to leave the protection of the castle, don't you."

-

"Yes Professor, and I swear I didn't."

"Very well, I trust you. There is one other matter I wish to discuss with you. N- Ms. Noksmyth said she saw you talking with Draco Malfoy?"

"Yes."

McGonagall pursed her lips, gazing sternly at Harry. "I do not think it is a good idea for you to associate with Mr. Malfoy, especially when there are so few people around."

"We were just talking about our potions assignment. Snape paired us up last term. I only saw him for about five minutes."

McGonagall nodded, accepting his answer. "You may go."

"Thank you professor."

oOo

In transfiguration they had started their solely theoretical study of animagi, and both Harry and Malfoy were currently sitting in armchairs in front of the fire working on their first essay on the topic. Harry was reading the book he had found in the chamber, and Malfoy was scribbling notes on a spare bit of parchment.

Animagia is a special branch of transfiguration, the study and practice of transforming from the human form to animal form. Wizards with the ability to perform the animagus transformation are called animagi. It is an incredibly difficult and rare ability. There are few wizards who are naturally gifted, but it is believed that it is possible for any wizard to perform the transformation given time and practice. History tells us that a wizard's animagus form usually (but not always) takes the form of their patronus, as the animal portrayed by both magics is a representation of some inner belief, experience or persona. Several notable animagi are Merlin, who became an owl, Gredford the Squeamish, who became a worm, and Wendolyn the Weird, who was able to transform into a salamander.

The latter is an example of a magical animagus. These are about as rare compared with all animagi as a natural animagus is to the whole population of magical people. In fact, in over a thousand years of written history, there are only sixty-two magical animagus recorded in Britain and on the continent, compared with over one thousand normal animagi in Great Britain alone.

A magical animagus differs from a normal animagus in several ways. First and foremost, a magical animagus takes the form of a magical creature, such as Wendolyn's salamander or Arthur King of England's Griffin. Other examples of magical forms include the dragon, unicorn, and it was rumoured that the Hogwarts founder Salazar Slytherin had the ability to transform into a basilisk. A magical animagus has greater control over the transformation than a regular animagus and can take on more than one form, though this takes much practice. The 'natural' form of the magical animagus is their first animal form, and it is usual for a magical animagus to take on a non-magical form similar to their magical form. For example, Meekel the Pure had a unicorn form, but due to the lack of practicality of walking around in this form (he was constantly mobbed, and once even attacked for -

his blood) he practiced until he could also assume the form of a white horse, which is very similar to a unicorn in shape and colour.

In recent years, the art of animagi has been dying out. In the last hundred years, there have been less than ten registered animagi, but it is the general consensus that there are many animagi who remain unregistered.

Harry grinned at the last part. Sirius and his father had been one of those 'many animagi' who did not register, along with Rita Skeeter who had, since Hermione's blackmail, still not printed anything negative or condescending about Harry.

For a wizard who is not a natural animagus, learning the art can take up to several years, depending on the dedication and ability of the wizard. Animagia is considered wandless magic, as it mostly requires strength of mind to initiate and successfully complete the change. While an amateur may find it easier to hold their wand as some focus of magical energy, an accomplished animagus will make the transformation wandlessly. Being a complex magical object, a wand will not be a part of the transformation as clothes can be.

That was interesting. He had never considered that animagia was wandless magic. Of course, if you were holding your wand to transform, you might not be able to hold it in your animal form, so wandlessly transforming did have a distinct advantage. Perhaps if you held your wand in a holster you could keep your wand with you?

Harry wondered what animal he would be if - no, when - he learned to transform. His first thought was a lion. He was a Gryffindor after all. But then, was he really? The sorting hat had wanted to put him in Slytherin, and he could talk Parseltongue, so perhaps he would be a snake? Then again, he loved to fly, so perhaps a bird of some kind suited him better.

"Hey Malfoy, what kind of animal do you think you'd be if you could transform?"

Malfoy looked up from his notes. "A dragon of course."



"But that's a magical animal. Magical animagi are exceptionally rare. You seem pretty sure of yourself."

"My patronus is a dragon, so there's a high chance my animagus form will be as well."

"Yeah, but your patronus is probably just a dragon because that's your namesake."

"My parents named me Draco because they thought I had a fiery temper, like a dragon. It's a facet of my personality, not just a name."

"I suppose. That'd be cool, being a magical animagus. You could learn to change in to all sorts of different animals. If I had a choice, I'd choose something that could fly."

"Well, dragons can fly, and breathe fire."

"Yes well I won't believe you're a dragon until I see it."

"Well, what do you think yours would be? An innocent little doe?"

-

Harry ignored the sarcastic tone. "My patronus is a stag. Anyway, I don't think so. I think that's only the form my patronus takes because that was my father's animagus form. I saw my father as protection."

Malfoy sat up and looked at Harry. "Your father was an animagus?"

"Yeah, he was friends with Lupin. Him and Sirius and... they used to transform to help him get through the full moon."

"You mean Sirius Black?"

"Mm. He was my godfather."

"Really? I'm related to him, you know."

"I know. I've seen a family tapestry in his house. His name got burned off though."

"When have you been in his house?"

"Last year, at Christmas. It was pretty much the last time I got with him before he died."

"You spent Christmas with him? But I heard he betrayed your parents to the Dark Lord!"

"No he didn't!" spat Harry, a little too vehemently. Malfoy raised an eyebrow at the outburst.

"Sorry. It just makes me so angry that people don't know Sirius was innocent. Peter Pettigrew is the one that should have been in Azkaban."

"Wait, Pettigrew? The rat? I don't believe it. He's such a weakling."

"Yeah. Pettigrew was my father's friend as well. He betrayed my parents. He's the reason they're dead."

Malfoy was silent for a moment. "If it were me, I'd want revenge."

Harry stared into the fire, mesmerised by the flickering flames as he whispered, "One day."

oOo

Hi everyone! Thanks for reading. Just letting you know updates might start taking a bit longer now. Pleasepleaseplease review.

Voldemort is Dead, Fhippogriff, MoonlightxParasite:  
Thankyouthankyouthankyou for the reviews. :)

## Acting Up

Harry was perusing the newspaper as he ate his breakfast. Every week there were more and more articles about alleged Death Eater attacks and missing persons. They were becoming so common that they were no longer front page news; instead they were abbreviated articles squashed together over a few pages of the Prophet. Flipping backwards through the paper, an article caught his eye.

### SCALES FOR SALE

Causing a stir in Potions circles this week is the appearance of some of the rarest of ingredients; basilisk scales. The scales are in the possession of Rae Chopaty, the owner of local apothecary 'Rae's Potions Supplies,' who acquired them from an unidentified seller for a 'respectable' price.

Mr. Chopaty expects that the parts will sell quickly, given the desire of Potions Masters to obtain these ingredients. Basilisk parts are used in a myriad of potions ranging from healing brews to poisons, all of which are very potent. Given the rarity of these ingredients and their demand, basilisk parts are some of the most expensive ingredients to purchase.

Chopaty described the seller only as young and of average appearance, and several noted Potions Masters and supply companies are asking the seller to come forward with anymore ingredients he may have.

Harry's grin widened as he read through the article. He finished and looked up at the Slytherin table where he met Malfoy's gaze. The Slytherin subtly toasted him, covering it by taking a sip from his mug. He then tilted his head very slightly in the direction of the head table before turning back to his breakfast. Harry let his eyes wander in the direction Malfoy had indicated and saw Snape sitting silently contemplating the Slytherin prefect. Suddenly, Snape's black gaze flickered to Harry, who quickly averted his gaze. When he looked back up at the table, Snape was sipping from his mug and conversing with McGonagall.

oOo

That night Harry had an Occlumency lesson with Snape, and he was desperately hoping that he had improved with the additional lessons he had been having with Malfoy. They had only practised together a few times, but Harry found Malfoy's way of explaining things so much simpler than Snape's complicated instructions.

Snape was, as usual, already in his office, so Harry knocked and entered at Snape's command.

"Have you been practicing?"

"Yes, every night."

"Good. We shall see how much you have improved."

Harry stood, locking eyes with Snape.

-

He immediately felt Snape's presence in his mind, even though Snape had not spoken the spell. Concentrating on impenetrable blackness, he imagined that Snape was free falling, unable to stop, with nothing to grab on to. All around him was empty space.

Unfortunately, Snape seemed to be slowing, and Harry watched as his descent finally coming to a halt, and as he stared blindly around him, unable to see.

Harry watched as Snape began to move very slowly forward and concentrated on making empty space again. After a few minutes, Snape was moving freely, but still unable to see, and Harry was starting to get a headache.

Gradually the darkness began to lighten, and Harry expected to feel the onslaught of memories at any moment, when Snape withdrew from his mind.

Harry shook his head, trying to clear the ache.

"I see you were not lying when you said you had been practicing. When I entered your mind, I did it as I would if I didn't want you to know I was there. The fact that you sensed me shows that you are learning to be aware of and control your mind."

Harry couldn't help but smile at the grudging praise, and Snape noticed.

"That is not to say that there is not still a long way to go. Your barrier is quite effective, but even so it was quickly becoming weaker. If I had kept it up, I would have eventually gotten through. Neither were you able to throw me from your mind completely, which is the ultimate goal of this exercise."

Harry gave a mental roll of his eyes.

"Do not roll your eyes at me, Potter!"

Harry jumped, taken aback.

"You see how much further you have to go?" sneered Snape.

Harry felt his shoulders slump and he rubbed at his head.

"We shall try once more, and then you may go."

This time, Snape managed to break down his barrier after several minutes, and began to sift through Harry's memories. Harry was playing chess with Ron... he was surrounded by Death Eaters... he was waking from a nightmare... eating breakfast and reading the article about basilisk parts... he stood in the alleyway with a charmed and transfigured Malfoy...

Snape looked at Harry angrily. "You were in Hogsmeade, after you were strictly told not to go."

"Not this weekend, it was another time--"

“That’s twenty points from Gryffindor. Do not lie to me, Potter! Rules are put in place for your protection, do you not realise that?”

-

“Of course I realise!” snapped Harry. “But it’s not fair that I have to stay behind when everyone else gets to go. Besides, no one knew I was there and nothing happened, so what does it matter?”

“It matters, Potter because one of these days something will happen, and if on that occasion you are once again flaunting the rules, then everything anyone has done to protect you will have been in vain!”

“That’s not fair! I never get to do anything I want. I’m not allowed out of my relatives’ house on the holidays and now I’m not even allowed on day trips to Hogsmeade. I refuse to be treated like a prisoner!”

“You are free to roam the castle grounds. That should be enough of an outlet for you.”

“I had stuff I wanted to get.”

Snape sneered. “Well, as long as your sweet tooth is satisfied, what does it matter if you die? By all means go ahead and risk your life.”

Harry scowled. Snape was making him feel guilty, and that wasn’t fair.

“I wasn’t risking my life. I was just walking around, completely invisible, with a friend!”

“Ah, yes. Who was that you were with? He looked familiar, but... he wasn’t a student.”

Harry averted his eyes. “Just a friend.”

“Just a friend,” mocked Snape. “Pray tell, did you just happen to run into this friend, or did he know you were coming?”

Harry was digging himself deeper and deeper into a hole, but he couldn’t tell the truth. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

"If he knew you were coming, that means you contacted him. What if your communication was intercepted? Then, he would not be the only one who knew you were in Hogsmeade, would he?"

"No sir," muttered Harry.

"You will have detention, Mr. Potter. Expect to hear from the headmaster. Go."

Fuming, Harry stormed back up to Gryffindor Tower.

...

That night, Harry had yet another vision. They were becoming increasingly frequent, despite the fact that he was progressing quite well with occluding his mind. On this particular occasion, he did not feel what Voldemort felt, but every curse that the man inflicted on his victims reflected upon his sleeping body. Voldemort and several Death Eaters were on a raid, attacking several isolated muggle houses.

"I will make you beg me for your life before I take it from you, worthless mudblood!"

-

The woman cried in fear, and then in pain as the Cruciatus was cast upon her again and again, until she was indeed begging him for mercy. Cutting curses drew bloody gashes in her body, and her screams subsided into anguished and desperate sobs as she gasped for breath.

When he grew tired of her, the bright green light of the Killing Curse flared from the windows of the country house, and the woman breathed no more.

oOo

Harry woke to a blinding whiteness, and groaned as he moved an aching arm over his eyes. The soft fabric of a bandage brushed his eyelids. He could vaguely hear voices talking nearby, but couldn't make out what they were saying.

Gradually his eyes adjusted to the light and he turned his head to see Madam Pomfrey in deep discussion with Dumbledore. As he watched, they were joined by Snape, who carried several vials filled with various coloured potions.

The Potions Master muttered something to the matron who took a vial, and the three turned to look at Harry, who blinked blearily. His head was killing him, the scar throbbing.

"You've woken earlier than I expected, Mr. Potter. How do you feel?" She bustled over, holding a hand to his forehead.

"Guh..."

"Not well, then. Can you sit up dear? The headmaster would like to ask you some questions."

Harry took a deep breath before pulling himself up on the pillows. His whole body felt like it had been run over by a steamroller, every muscle was burning. He winced in pain and the matron cast him a sympathetic glance. "We'll be able to give you something for the pain as soon as we understand fully how you were injured. Headmaster?"

Dumbledore thanked the matron and took a seat beside Harry's bed, Snape hanging behind him. "Do you remember what happened Harry?"

"Vision," grunted Harry.

"Your friends Mr. Longbottom and Mr. Thomas fetched Professor McGonagall early this morning. You were screaming, and we could not wake you."

Harry nodded briefly in response, his eyes drifting closed.



“Madam Pomfrey has fixed the nasty cut on your arm, but she believes you are also suffering the effects of the cruciatus curse, and Professor Snape concurs with this assessment. We cannot however give you a potion for that unless we are certain that is what it was, for the results could be undesirable.”

Harry nodded again, once. “Cruciatus. Lots.”

Dumbledore sighed, and when he spoke his voice was weary. “Very well, my boy. Severus...”

-

Harry felt a vial pressed to his lips. “Drink Potter. I assure you you will start to feel much better.”

Harry let the cool liquid trickle down his throat, the cool, tingling sensation surprisingly pleasant on his sore throat.

There was a moment of silence before Dumbledore spoke again.

“I assume you had a vision of Voldemort, correct?”

Harry nodded a third time. “He was attacking muggles.”

“Professor Snape tells me that you are progressing nicely with Occlumency-“

Dumbledore was interrupted by a snort from Snape, but continued as if he had heard nothing.

“Are your visions lessening?”

“No. I have more than I’ve ever had and they’re getting worse.”

Dumbledore exchanged a dismayed look with Snape.

“Is this the first time you have suffered these effect after a vision?”

Harry shook his head. “No, this is the worst though.”

“Stupid boy!” snapped Snape. “Why didn’t you tell anyone you were being hurt?”

Harry managed a scowl. “It’s never been this bad before. Usually I’m just a bit sore for a few days. I’ve never had any cuts before, either.”

“Then it would seem these visions of yours are indeed getting worse. I will have to give the matter some thought.”

Snape turned to go. “If that is all, Albus?”

“Yes, thankyou Severus.”

Snape looked at Harry. “Well, I suppose you are excused from class today, Potter. Don’t think I will allow you to fall behind, however.” Snape swept out of the room, his robes billowing behind him.

Dumbledore chuckled. “He is difficult to please, isn’t he?”

Harry snorted, beginning to drift off to sleep.

“Get some rest now, Harry.”

...

When he awoke, he found Hermione and Ron talking quietly beside his bed. Late afternoon sun was shining through the panes of the window near his bed. When Hermione saw that he was awake, she gave a little scream and flung herself at him. Thankfully, Snape’s potion had done a good job and his body was no longer aching as it had been before, though he still felt a little stiff. “Harry! I’m so glad you’re alright.”

-

“I’m fine Mione.”

“We were worried about you, mate. We couldn’t wake you up and you wouldn’t stop screaming!”

“Sorry Ron. You guys must be getting sick of me waking you up by now.”

“Don’t worry about it Harry. We’re just glad you’re alright... You are alright, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I feel heaps better than I did this morning.”

Ron leaned forward and lowered his voice, sounding worried. “I didn’t know you felt the effects of what you saw.”

“I don’t always, but the visions have been getting worse lately.”

“That’s Snape’s fault, I’ll bet you anything! He’s intentionally not teaching you properly!”

“Ron!” reprimanded Hermione. “How many times do we have to have this discussion. We trust Professor Snape.”

“You might, but I still think he’s a dirty Death Eater.”

“I have been getting better lately though. My Occlumency is improving.”

“That’s great, Harry!” beamed Hermione.

Ron didn’t appear at all swayed by this, continuing to mumble about Snape’s loyalties.

oOo

Harry was released from the infirmary the next morning. He felt he could have left the previous night, but Madam Pomfrey had wanted to keep him in overnight. It was Wednesday, and due to lucky timetable planning, he had no classes all day. Hermione and Ron did, so Harry was planning on spending some time in the chamber. The potions Madame Pomfrey and Snape had given him had relieved most of his pain, but the throbbing in his scar had yet to ease.

Not wanting to suffer the noise of the Great Hall, he decided to stop by the kitchens on his way to the chamber. First though, he needed to get his bag from his dorm. The common room was fairly empty, with only a few older students on their way to classes of a late breakfast.

“Hi Harry!”

“Hi Pandora.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I’ve been better.” He gave a wan smile, which she returned with a wide grin. “Listen, I want to apologise for ditching you the other day with Malfoy. I didn’t expect to be gone so long.”

“Oh, that’s alright. I had lots of work to do anyway. Speaking of which, do you want to join me down here? You have free day, right?”

-

“Er... yeah I do.” Harry wondered how she knew, but then remembered she had all but two classes with him and must have a completely free day as well. “I was actually just going to go and lay down for a while. Maybe later?”

“Alright, see you then.” She turned and went back over to the table where she had been working and Harry continued up to his dormitory. Once he was there, he extracted his cloak and put it on. Not really feeling up to walking, he pulled the pendant from his shirt and apparated to the corridor where the kitchens were. Pulling off the cloak and stepping into the kitchen, he was immediately swamped by house elves, clambering to serve him.

“Dobby is here, Harry Potter sir!”

Harry grinned down at the little elf. It was the first time he had seen the excitable elf since the last year. “How’s it going, Dobby?”

“Most excellently, Harry Potter! Dobby and Winky is being very good.”

“That’s great Dobby.”

“What can Dobby get for Harry Potter sir?”

“Oh, I missed out on breakfast, I was just hoping I could get a plate of whatever was served in the Great Hall.

“Right away!” Dobby whizzed of, his bat-like ears flapping comically.

...

Ten minutes later, Harry was seated comfortably on the lounge in the chamber, Salazar curled around his neck as he demolished his bacon and eggs.

“Sssmelssss ssstrange, Harryyyy.”

“That’ssss becausssse it’sss cooked, Salzzz. All you eat isss dead miccce.”

“Crunchy, juicccy, sweet mousiessss. Eyesiessss popping-“

“Ugh!” Harry groaned. “Not while I’m eating, Salzzzz. That’ssss disssgusssting!”

“Sssorryyy Harryyyy,” hissed the little snake, but Harry thought he could hear a grin in the snake’s voice.

After he had finished the scrumptious breakfast, Harry filled his pockets with some purchases he had made in Honeydukes and set about exploring the chamber a bit more. So far, he had been in the library, Room of Requirement, the Snake Chamber (what he called the room with the snake tank), and the tunnels that led to the House common rooms. There were several archways leading off of the library that he had yet to investigate.

The first archway he tried opened into a short passage way that lead to a carved and polished wooden door. Harry turned the handle and pushed open the door. At first he could see nothing, the room being

black as night. As soon as he took a step forward however, wall sconces burst into light, -

illuminating the room. Harry stared around at the lavishly decorated space. It was round, about five metres across with a fireplace set in one wall. At the back of the room directly across from the door sat a huge wooden desk, covered in papers. Shelves lined the walls, some stacked with books, others with small statues, other still with a myriad of intricate machines and gadgets like the ones that sat in Dumbledore's office. Harry was standing in the personal study of Salazar Slytherin.

He walked over to the desk and sat in the plush chair. Pulling at several drawers, he found they were all locked, and he was unable to unlock them with a simple Alohamora. There was no keyhole that he could see, and he wondered how to open them. It was quiet and cool in the room, and Harry thought it would be the perfect place to study.

After spending some more time inspecting the shelves, Harry left and took another passage way that led from the library. This one was even shorter, but ended in a stair case.

At least, what used to be a staircase. All that now remained was a five stone steps, curve slightly in the shape of the stairwell. Harry craned his neck to look up through the middle of the circular stairwell. It was high, higher than the one that led to Slytherin.

He stepped up on to the second step, wondering if perhaps Slytherin hadn't finished building this part of the chamber, for there was no rubble around to indicate that the stairs had collapsed. Suddenly, the block of stone jerked forwards. Harry was startled and stepped back, falling down at the base of the stairs, which stopped moving the instant his feet left them.

Harry grinned and pulled himself to his feet. The adventure was not over! He climbed back on to the stairs and they began to move again, taking him higher and higher. He was a bit nervous; the stairs had no railing and there was nothing to catch him if he fell except the floor, which was moving further and further away. But, he was not a

Quidditch player for nothing, and the higher he got the less worried he became.

After a minute, the stairs ended at a small platform that had three archways leading off of it.

There were runes above each one, but Harry couldn't identify any of them. Shrugging, he picked the first and walked into it. Inside was another staircase, though this one was fully built and he stepped onto it. It went up about two stories and ended with a flat roof like the passage that led to Gryffindor Tower. He reached up and stoked his finger along the gouge in the rock, supremely grateful that Malfoy had explained it to him. The rock shimmer away and Harry climbed out of the hole.

He was in a small, square, empty room that had three archways leading off of it and one with a closed door. He took one of the archways, and into a lounge. On the other side was another door, and Harry entered it.

He was in a bedroom. A gaudily decorated bedroom. Harry knew instantly who must live here. The king sized bed was covered in bright purple sheets with sparkling yellow stars, and the window opened up to a brilliant view of the castle grounds, overlooking the greenhouses. In the corner of the room sat a mirror that Harry immediately recognised.

-

He walked over and stood before the mirror, and as he had the other times he had gazed into the Mirror of Erised, he saw himself surrounded by his family. Tearing his gaze away from the mirror, he briefly looked around the headmaster's chambers. They consisted of a small kitchen, which appeared unused, a dining room, a lounge, study, bathroom and bedroom.

Feeling distinctly uneasy, Harry rushed back into the small entrance room and opened the entrance to the stairway, moving quickly down it. He sighed in relief as the entrance way shimmered back into being.

He had a pretty good idea of where the second archway must lead – to Dumbledore's office, most likely. Salazar Slytherin certainly was a sly devil! He decided not to try it just in case. At this time of day, Dumbledore was probably in there. Instead, he turned to the third archway and stepped through it. Harry stared in surprise. He was facing the stone Gargoyle that led up to Dumbledore's office! There was a walk about a half metre long, strangely enough not of stone, but of dirt and small pebbles, that ended in the corridor, and Harry cautiously walked into the hall with a frown on his face. Turning, he saw why he had never known there was a passage way before and sighed in relief when he realised no one would be able to get into the chamber. The wall he had walked through was not a wall at all, but a large painting.

It was not of a waterfall like the one that led to Snape's chambers, but an image of a twisting path that led into the distant hills.

Harry walked into it, and felt along the sides of the passage way. Sure enough, he felt the static feel of magic, and found he could push his hand through.

He walked back into the corridor and inspected the painting. There was nothing about it to indicate that it was any different from any of the other paintings. A sudden thought occurred to him. Walking to the next painting, he held his hand up to the canvas. His fingers met the painted surface and he pushed a little. Nothing. Through the fabric he could feel the hard wood of the back of the frame.

Salazar Slytherin must have specially spelled some of the paintings. He went back to the first painting and looked carefully, not at the actual painting, but at the frame. His eyes scanned the gilded border and he finally found it, at the bottom right corner. Etched in the gold was a tiny little snake, unnoticeable unless you were looking for it.

From then on, Harry resolved to keep an eye out for other paintings that could be entered from the real world. He assumed they would have to be larger paintings, big enough for a grown man to walk through, and that they would have some symbol, probably a snake, that represented Slytherin's tampering with the magic of the painting.



...

After that, Harry made his way back to the common room.

"Harry? I thought you were up in your dormitory? I didn't see you come down," Pandora said, with a puzzled frown.

"I just went to get some lunch," he lied. "I'll just go up and get my writing stuff."

-

Back down in the common room he took a seat across from Pandora and began work on his charms essay. "How are you liking Hogwarts so far?"

Pandora looked up. "Oh, I love it! Absolutely fantastic and definitely better than Freilies'.

"Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"You know," she waved her hand dismissively. "Just the atmosphere, nicer teachers. Things like that."

They worked in a comfortable silence for a while before they were joined by Ron and Hermione.

"Hey Harry. Feeling better?"

"Yeah, heaps better. I don't know how I'm going to sleep tonight though, since I slept all yesterday and last night."

"Well," said Ron, leaning closer and dropping his voice conspiratorially, "I think I have an idea. It's time to get those Slytherin's back for that banner."

"Ron! You. Are. A. Prefect!" ground out Hermione, but Pandora clapped her hands and leaned in, a look of anticipation on her face.

"What've you got in mind?" asked Harry.

Hermione sighed and rolled her eyes. "I am going to pretend you're not even talking about this. If you get in trouble, don't tell me I didn't warn you." With that, she turned back to her book and became engrossed in it.

Ron spoke again. "Me'n Seamus 'n Dean were talking about it Herbology yesterday. McGonagall's got the banner folded up in her office. Seamus reckons we should transfigure it so it says 'Slytherin's drule' and then hang it in their common room."

Pandora crowed in delight, but Harry winced. Personally, he thought it was a bit lame and unoriginal, but he was sure there was something else they could do while they were there.

"The only problem is we don't know the password. We could use your cloak and wait around outside to hear it, and then go back when everyone's asleep."

After dinner that night, Harry was assigned the task of learning the password. It was a useless endeavour, as the Slytherin's were an exceedingly suspicious and cautious lot. Harry strained to hear, but he never caught the whispered word.

Too impatient to wait around, he went back to the common room. He knew he could open it in Parseltongue anyway. When Dean asked him if he had got the password, he just nodded.

Nearing midnight six of them; Harry, Ron, Pandora, Seamus, Dean and surprisingly Neville, crept to McGonagall's office. There was too many of them to fit under the cloak, so Ron was keeping an eye on the Marauder's map. "All clear," he whispered when they reached the office of their head of house.

-

Luckily, McGonagall did not lock her office, and it was a small matter of slipping in, grabbing the heavy banner, and slipping out again.

They found an unlocked classroom and unfolded the banner, and Dean added a 'd' to the front of 'rules'. Then, they carried the banner down to the dungeons. Once, they were forced to hide behind a tapestry that guarded a hidden passageway when Flitwick patrolled down the hallway.

Once they were at the Slytherin common room, Harry waited until Ron gave the all clear. When Ron nodded, he darted forward and hissed "Open" in Parseltongue. As he had known it would, the portrait popped open, and the others followed him quietly in to enemy territory.

"Wow..." mouthed Dean. As an artist, the boy could appreciate the intricate designs of the Slytherin room.

They set to work quickly, Ron levitating the banner up to the ceiling over the fireplace and Pandora muttering a sticking charm. For good measure, Harry spelled it with a Parseltongue version of the spell that he had found in the little green book. Loosely translated, it meant 'like spider's web.'

It was a spell that couldn't simply be undone by a finite, and no one else in the school could speak Parseltongue as far as he knew, so he had a feeling the banner would be up there a bit longer than it had been in Gryffindor.

The six looked up at the handiwork. "You know," said Harry. "I think this room needs a little something extra, don't you?"

The others looked at him, confused. "What do you mean?" asked Neville.

"I think we should let them know for sure that Gryffindor did this."

Neville's eyes lit up. "How? What are you planning?"

"Well," he mused, looking around the room. "I think there's far too much green in here, don't you?"

Pandora smiled and took out her wand again.

"I never was good at transfiguring metals, but I could do the green." She grinned wickedly and waved her wand. Instantly, the Slytherin common room, once accented emerald green was now done in a deep red.

They all grinned happily at the change. Neville took out the camera he had borrowed from Colin Creevey and several bright flashes lit the room briefly.

"Let's get out of here," said Ron after one more look around the room. They crept back up to Gryffindor Tower, not running into anyone on the way.

oOo

The next morning, Harry waited expectantly at the Gryffindor Table, along with most other members of his house. Everyone knew what had been done to the Slytherin's, having seen the photos that -

morning, and every face had a happy grin, their eyes on the entry way the Slytherin's would come through.

The Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and head tables were nearly all full when the Slytherin's began to trickle in in groups, sullen and angry looks on their faces. Laughter broke out as they shot dirty looks at the Gryffindor table, and Seamus hi-fived Dean.

"Doesn't look like they've got it down yet!" crowed Ron.

Harry saw Snape enter through the door behind the head table. He took a seat between McGonagall and Flitwick, immediately tuning to McGonagall with a scowl on his face. McGonagall smiled as she sipped her tea.

Unnoticed by Snape, a shower of rubies dropped into Gryffindor's hour glass.

...

“Taken an interest in art lately Harry?” asked Ron somewhat jokingly as he accompanied Harry, Pandora and Hermione to charms after breakfast. Ron himself was not taking the class.

Harry started and looked at Ron. He had been intently inspecting the frame of any large paintings they passed, but had not yet come across any appearing to have a snake like symbol.

“Oh, er... just looking.”

“Well you were looking pretty hard! I’ve didn’t know you were in to art.”

“I’m not, really.”

“Could’ve fooled me!”

...

After charms Harry, Pandora, Seamus and Hermione went to potions, Harry taking his seat next to Malfoy. Snape entered the classroom and scowled at the students, giving the four Gryffindor’s in the room a particularly venomous glare. Harry couldn’t hide his smirk.

“Ten points from Gryffindor Potter, and detention!”

His friends cast him sympathetic glances, but didn’t speak up. Snape was clearly in a foul mood.

After a short lecture from Snape, they set about brewing the day’s potion; the Draught of Living Death. It was an extremely volatile potion, requiring the utmost concentration, and the whole class was working silently, except for occasional whispered instructions. The most talkative person was the Potions Master himself, who stalked between the cauldrons sniping at everyone about how pathetic their potions were.

Harry and Malfoy finished the first stage of their potion, which now needed to stew for at least 24 hours ahead of everyone, even Hermione and Seamus. Snape, much to Harry’s surprise, allowed

them to leave after they had cleaned up their bench to his satisfaction. Well, he told Malfoy he could enjoy the rest of the lesson at his leisure and ordered Harry to 'Get out before I murder you.'

-

"Well that's a first," said Harry, as they walked through the dungeon corridors.

"I think he just can't stand the sight of Gryffindors at the moment."

"Oh, why ever not?" asked Harry innocently, the corners of his mouth quirking upwards slightly.

Malfoy scowled at him. "You know exactly why, Potter. You defiled the Slytherin Common Room."

Harry felt his face break out in a mirthful grin. "Surely it wasn't that bad?"

"It looked absolutely disgusting! To make it worse, Snape was furious at us for letting it happen. He thinks someone let the password slip, even though only Gryffindors or Hufflepuffs are that stupid."

"Well he certainly wasn't his usual friendly self in class."

"Ha ha," said Malfoy in an equally sarcastic tone. "He's just mad because he couldn't undo whatever sticking charm you used."

Harry smirked. "Hm, yes. I thought you might all find that difficult to remove."

Malfoy scowled. "It had better not be. It's extremely demoralising, not to say pathetically unoriginal."

"True, but I thought it looked good."

"Tell me how to remove it Potter! It must be something pretty obscure if Snape couldn't remove it."

Harry smirked at Malfoy. "Let's just say that the Slytherins aren't quite as snake-like as they need to be."

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. "That, Potter, is extremely unfair."

"A little ironic, perhaps."

"Harry!" called a feminine voice from behind them at the far end of the corridor near their classroom. "Wait for meee!"

Harry gave a mental groan. "Pretend you can't hear her!" he hissed as he and Malfoy rounded the corner.

Malfoy cast an amused look at Harry. "Not as much a fan of her as she obviously is of you?"

"She's ok, in small doses. But she's just always there." They were approaching the Slytherin common room, and could hear Pandora's rushed footsteps echoing in the empty dungeons.

"Well, see you. I've gotta run."

"I pity you, Potter," said the Slytherin as he spoke the password.

Harry raised an enquiring eyebrow. "I thought Slytherins weren't stupid enough to let their password slip?"

-

"I know you don't need it, so it doesn't really matter if you know it or not. Besides, it's changing tonight."

Suddenly, Malfoy reached out and grabbed Harry by the back of his robes, pushing him in to the room. Harry stumbled and fell to the ground inside the once again green room.

"What the hell was that for?" he hissed, turning on Malfoy.

"I didn't think you had enough time to escape the Noksmyth girl. Take that atrocious look off your face. You should be thanking me."

Harry pursed his lips. He couldn't really argue. "Next time an 'after you' would be fine."

"Don't hold your breath waiting for that. Anyway, now you owe me."

At Harry's suspicious look, Malfoy jerked his head at the banner.

"You want me to take it down," stated Harry flatly. "No."

"Why not? If you used some Parsel-spell, we might never get it down."

"And that would be truly tragic," replied Harry. He could see Malfoy was starting to get angry. "Look, I'm not going to take it down today, alright? Maybe not tomorrow either. But I promise you I will take it down. It won't be up there forever."

Still scowling, Malfoy grudgingly accepted.

"Chamber?"

"Lunch."

"Alright, but let's eat there. And I need to get some stuff from my dorm first."

"Fine. I'll get something on the way. Bring that map you told me about."

Harry nodded and Malfoy opened the portrait hole, checking that the coast was clear. "Give me fifteen minutes." He headed straight for Gryffindor Tower, hoping he wouldn't run in to Pandora. Luckily, she was nowhere to be seen, and he slipped in and out of the dorm, donning his invisibility cloak and putting the map in his pocket.

He arrived at the same time as Malfoy, whipping off his cloak as he stepped in front of the boy. To his displeasure, he received not so much as a flinch, merely a raised eyebrow.



"I brought sandwiches."

"Good, I'm starving."

Down in the library, they ate several sandwiches each before settling down to do some work. Harry was putting the finishing touches on his animagus essay. Now that he was finished, he was even surer that he wanted to try the transformation. He intended to ask Ron and Hermione so that they could all learn together like the Marauders had.

-

After he had finished, Malfoy challenged him to a duel and they spent the afternoon improving their skills. Harry was jealous to note that the Slytherin far outperformed him when it came to wordless spells, though Harry was certainly getting better. He could now silently accio an object with ease (not that this was much use in a duel) and when he concentrated hard for a good five minutes, could usually coax a defensive spell from his wand. Again, not much use in a duelling situation.

They had a break before they went down to dinner during which Harry showed Malfoy the map. The Slytherin was suitably impressed. "Not a bad piece of magic at all. Who are these Marauders though? Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs?"

"You know three of them, actually."

Malfoy looked up, surprised. "Know them? But I thought you said this map was twenty years old. How do I know them?"

"Well, Moony is none other than Professor Lupin."

"The werewolf? Ha. Appropriate nickname."

"Hm. Padfoot was Sirius, Wormtail was Pettigrew and Prongs was my father."

"I can't believe it! So they made it when they were at school?"

“Yeah. Not sure what year they were in, but I’m guessing NEWT level, cos it’s pretty complex.”

“Hell yes. I’d have no idea how to go about making something like this,” said Malfoy, peering intently at the map. “Ha, look! My dear cousin,” he said, pointing.

“Tonks?”

“Yeah. How did you know that?”

“I know her. She was related to Sirius, remember. She’s spent some time at his house too.”

“Ah, yes. The Headquarters of the Order of the Pheonix.” Malfoy sneered at the name as Harry whipped his head up to stare at the blonde.

“How the hell do you know about all that?”

“Don’t get your knickers in a twist Potter. Of course our side knows about it. Unfortunately, we don’t know where it is.”

Harry calmed his breathing. “Yeah, well. Maybe we shouldn’t talk about that.”

Malfoy shrugged. “Fine by me. I know you can’t tell me anyway.”

Harry leaned back over the map. Tonks was walking down the spiral staircase and into the corridor. Harry noticed Ron and Hermione there, and the three little dots set off together.

“Let’s go now. I want to say hi to Tonks. I haven’t seen her in ages.”

“Shame,” sneered Malfoy sarcastically.

-

Harry scowled. “Do you even know her? Or do you just hate her because your Aunt married a muggle?”

"I do not consider Andromeda my Aunt, Potter. She's a traitor, and Nymphadora is no better."

"Maybe you should get to know her before you judge her. She's awesome."

"I don't have to get to know her to know what she's like, and I don't want to."

"Whatever. That's your problem. I'm not going to get into an argument with you about it."

"Good."

Harry left the way they had come in, but Malfoy took the route to the Slytherin dorms.

Harry was looking forward to talking to Tonks, but when he reached the Entrance Hall, Tonks was gone and Ron, Hermione, Neville and Pandora were just entering the Great Hall. He hurried after them and sat down between Ron and Neville and across from the girls.

"Hey guys."

"Harry! Where have you been all day, and don't say the library, because we looked there!"

"I just took a walk after lunch. I suppose I was gone longer than I thought."

Ron and Hermione exchanged an exasperated glance. "You seem to be taking a lot of long walks lately Harry."

Harry shrugged, ignoring the insinuation that he was lying.

"How's Tonks?"

Beside him, Ron choked on his meatballs, and Harry slapped him on the back. "Slow down, mate. You've got plenty of time to eat all that. So how was she? I haven't seen her for ages."

"Oh, she's good. She just had some business to discuss with Dumbledore. Er... how did you know she was here?" asked Hermione.

Harry jerked his head at the map, which he had placed next to his plate. "Map."

"Oh!" said Hermione, raising a hand to her mouth. "Well, er, she had to leave pretty quickly. Busy, you know."

"Yeah."

oOo

The next morning, Harry walked down to the lake for their third group defence lesson. So far in the competition, he and Malfoy's strategy was paying off and they were coming first, not having been knocked out once. There were two groups tied for second, three tied for third and four tied for fourth place. Overall, everyone was doing quite well. Today, Harry and Malfoy had been positioned by Snape on the far side of the lake between Neville and Pandora on one side and Parvati and -

Lavender on the other. As soon as the group had moved on, Malfoy set about creating the barrier spell and linking it back to both of them. Then

They sat between some bushes to discuss other tactics.

"I'm of the opinion we should go with the same as usual. It's worked so far, except no disillusionment charms this time."

They had tried doing it on both of them the previous week, but quickly realised it was a bad idea. When they did both of them, it was impossible to countdown their attack when they were spread apart. To solve the problem, they had decided that this week they would try just doing one of them, while the other had the task of counting down

the attack so they could fire off spells simultaneously. That had worked better, but then the disillusioned person couldn't signal to the other.

"Next week we should bring your cloak."

Harry nodded in agreement. "Lavender and Parvati should be fairly easy to take out. Nev and Pandora will be a bit harder, but I think we'll manage it. Harry had been pleasantly surprised to hear that Neville was in one of the teams coming second. He had certainly improved over previous years, and he and Pandora, who was a very good duellist, made a formidable team.

Sparks announcing the beginning of the competition lit the sky and faded quickly. No sooner had they dissipated, then Harry felt a tug indicating that someone had crossed the barrier. Evidently, Lavender and Parvati had decided not to wait for Snape's signal.

Harry searched the forest and only spotted Lavender when she was quite close. She appeared to have camouflaged herself, her skin was a mottled green, as were her robes, and she was moving slowly and low to the ground.

Harry looked across at Malfoy and saw the other boy gazing intently into the trees. After a minute, he turned slowly to Harry and gave him an expectant nod. Harry nodded to indicate he had a target, pointing in lavender's direction. Malfoy sought the girl out and then held up three fingers.

As he dropped the last, Harry aimed through the branches and stunned Lavender. She dropped like a rock.

...

Nearing the end of the lesson, they had taken out two more pairs (Pandora and Neville and Abbot and Finch-Fletchly) and were moving slowly through the forest when a bright flash happened close to Harry. Dropping to the ground, he saw Hermione looking furiously behind him, and turned to see Malfoy, his wand pointed at Hermione.

“Get up, Potter! I have myself to look out for you know. I can’t spend all my time defending you because you don’t watch where you’re going.”

Harry jumped up as Malfoy began exchanging jinxes and hexes with Hermione.

-

Harry looked around desperately seeking Ron, and spotted the red head as he took aim at Malfoy’s back. Harry flung his wand out, hissing out the Parseltongue sticking spell he had used on the banner.

Ron lurched as his feet stuck to the ground, and his muttered curse fired off wildly. He regained his balance quickly and Harry fired again, trying to hit Ron with Esacia, the Parseltongue stupefying spell.

Ron fought back in the best duel Harry had had with him, but eventually Harry got him. Drawing deep breaths, he turned to see what was happening with Malfoy and Hermione. To his surprise Malfoy was leaning against a tree, relaxed and casual.

“What are you doing? You could have helped me you know!” said Harry hotly.

“You had it under control,” said Malfoy dismissively.

This angered Harry. “I nearly didn’t. Anyway, you should have been keeping a lookout for others, not standing around watching.”

“There’s no one left. We won again. As soon as I got Granger down I shot up green sparks.”

Harry looked through the trees over the lake and saw Snape’s red sparks that indicated the lesson had ended.

“Excellent!”

“I see no apology is forthcoming,” remarked Draco drily.

Harry snorted. "For what, exactly?"

"For thinking that I would be so careless and incompetent as to do those things you mentioned."

Harry scowled and turned away to enervate his friends.

...

Harry had just changed out of his dirty defence clothes and left his dormitory. He was currently crouched on the balcony, tying his shoelace when he heard approaching footsteps. He looked up to see Hermione and Ron standing over him before finishing his laces.

"Harry, we need to talk to you now," said Hermione.

Harry looked up when he heard the tone of her voice. "About what? Is something wrong?"

Hermione shared an uneasy look with Ron. "It's you Harry."

Harry frowned, standing up to face them fully. "What do you mean?"

"It's the way you've been acting lately, going off on your own for hours on end, and no one can find you, and you don't even tell the truth about where you've been."

"What's wrong with that?"

-

"What's wrong with it is that you don't even appear on the map! Where do you go? Do you leave the castle?" asked Ron.

"Of course I don't! Sometimes I just want some time alone."

"And it's not just that," persisted Hermione. "You don't tell us things anymore. You've become more and more withdrawn and we're worried about you."

Ron sighed, seeming frustrated. "And what was that today? I thought you weren't doing that anymore."

Harry looked between his two friends, puzzled. "Doing what?"

"I mean talking in Parseltongue. You know people don't like it."

Harry stiffened. "You mean you don't like it."

"We thought you were just acting up a bit 'cos of Sirius, we thought it was just a phase and that you'd snap out of it," said Ron.

"Acting up?" Harry hissed, quickly growing angry at the direction the conversation was taking.

"It isn't anything personal, Harry. You've just changed so much since Sirius died."

"Maybe I've just realised that I'm on my own and I need to learn to look after myself. I thought friends were supposed to be accepting? "

"Harry, we are! It's just that you're a parselmouth and you know--"

"Yeah?" Harry roared, cutting her off. "Well you're a mudblood and you're dirt poor, but I don't hold it against you, do I?" he yelled, turning from Hermione to Ron.

A shocked silence greeted his words, and he lowered his voice to a deadly whisper.

"If you can't be accepting of me, then I'm not going to put up with either of you. You two should know what it's like to be singled out and picked on for your differences. I never expected my friends to do the same to me, but if you want to side with the majority, then fine!"

Ignoring the looks of horror on the faces of the few people in the room, Harry spun and stormed from the Gryffindor Common Room.

Good chapter good reviews... i hope. Please?



## REVIEWERS:

Vanessa Riddle: I never even thought about Harry looking at the map, so this chapter dealt with that a bit. Thank you for reviewing! Hope you continue to enjoy :)

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fhippogriff: All your questions shall be answered in time... Glad you liked the lesson. I liked writing that part. : )

MoonlightxParasite: Hehe thank you. And Thanks for reviewing!

Xurtan: Thanks for the review! As for your questions, they shall be answered. ;)

Jensindenial3516: Yeah, I don't think there are enough fics out there where they're just friends. If you know of any pls let me know! Thanks for the review.

## Departing

What he had just done was incredibly stupid. The news that he had called one of his best friends a mudblood would surely spread like wildfire. Still, he wasn't entirely regretful. He hadn't been insulting them per se; he honestly didn't care that Ron's family didn't have much money, or that Hermione was muggle born. He had merely been pointing out that they, like him had things held against them, and should be standing up for him and supporting him rather than opposing him. Still, perhaps 'mudblood' had been a bit harsh.

No! He wasn't going to feel sorry for them. Already he was starting to feel guilty, and that wasn't fair. Emotions were such a hassle, he thought as he stormed down to the chamber. He could have used the pendant, but the stamping feet and heavy breathing was suitable to his current mood. Just sitting while feeling angry did not seem right.

He could understand why Snape had trained himself to push away unwanted emotions.

Several first years scattered from his angry gaze as he rounded the corner in the corridor of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Slamming open the door, he descended in to the cool darkness of the chamber.

Instead of going to the library he stayed in the Basilisk Chamber, doing laps of the room. He came to the wall opposite the statue. "Aagh!" he roared, punching the hard stone wall.

"Dammit!" Another punch. It hurt, but the pain felt good. It was sharp and real, and a relief to the angry thoughts running through his head. He needed to let out his anger.

He punched the wall again and again, his knuckles becoming bloody, and staining a patch of the wall with a red sheen. When he could no longer stand the pain, he walked away from the wall, collapsing in the middle of the cold stone floor, his arms and legs spread. He gazed up at the snakes and leaf patterns carved into the ceiling, fuming about the attitudes of people who were supposed to be his best friends. Eventually, the cold seeped into his bones and he began to shiver.

Feeling mentally and physically drained, he pulled himself up and went to the library, falling on to the lounge.

“Harryyy... I sssmelll blood. What’sss wrong?”

“Salzzz...” Harry patted the little snake as it slithered on to his lap and up his arm. “At leassst I have you. You don’t care if I can talk to sssnakesss.”

“Of coursse not Haryyy. Why would anyyyone?”

-

Harry laughed humourlessly. “They think it’sss bad.”

“Sssilly humansss.”

“Yeah.”

He fell asleep on the lounge and woke several hours later. He couldn’t face Hermione right now, and as much as he knew he would regret it later to miss Snape’s Potions class now, he didn’t move from the lounge.

When enough time had passed that there was no possibility of him turning up without Snape taking points or giving detention, he knew it couldn’t get worse and was finally able to relax a bit. A sudden thought occurred to him. Jumping up, he slipped the pendant from his shirt and appeared before the waterfall painting. Stepping into it, he made his way quickly through the paintings to the one that occupied a spot on the wall in the potions lab.

It was a painting depicting a dark room, one of the corners completely enveloped in shadow. It was in this corner that Harry stood, confident that he couldn’t be seen unless someone chose to look hard enough. In his opinion, it was a fairly depressing painting, so he thought he was safe.

He had an excellent view of the classroom, where Snape was currently lecturing on the potion he wanted the class to brew. On the

far side at the back, Malfoy stood alone at their cauldron and as Harry watched, his eyes flickered towards the door, his scowl deepening.

Harry's view shifted as he sought out Hermione. She was standing next to her cauldron with Hannah, and had a thoroughly depressed look on her face. Serves her right! He thought viciously.

Snape finished his lecture and set about prowling the dungeon, making sarcastic remarks about anyone's potion preparation who wasn't a Slytherin. Harry scowled. The man really was a bitter old git. Deciding to lift his spirits a bit, he pulled a dead pen from his pocket and a loose bit of parchment that was covered in scribbled notes. Ripping off a corner of the parchment, he rolled it into a ball and popped it into his mouth, making sure it was thoroughly coated in saliva. While he did that, he pulled apart the pen and dropped the bits he didn't want into his pocket, leaving him with a hollow tube. Grinning, he spat the slime ball onto his hand and deposited it into the tube of the pen.

Then, he very carefully pushed the end of the tube through the canvas. He positioned it carefully and put the other end in his mouth, tracking Snape as the man moved between the cauldrons. Taking a deep breath, he blew out through his mouth and the spit ball flew through the air at the snarky potions professor.

Harry punched the air when it hit its mark, but he was disappointed. The spit ball had hit Snape's robed arm and dropped harmlessly to the floor, and he did not appear to have felt it.

Several of Harry's next shots became tangled in Snape's hair, though no one but Harry seemed to notice. Harry loaded another spit ball and blew. He let out a laugh, slapping a hand to his mouth as Snape's hand shot to his ear, a potion stained finger digging in to retrieve the projectile.

-

Unfortunately, Snape seemed to have heard the laugh and spun to face in Harry's direction. Harry ducked down below the frame, trying to stop laughing. Several giggles escaped as he held his breath in an

effort to stop. Finally, he peeked over the frame, still containing chuckles.

The class was looking around, puzzled, and Snape's expression was absolutely livid as his black gaze swept the classroom, seeking out the perpetrator of such a horrid act.

Not wanting to push his luck, Harry chose another victim. He aimed the pen in Malfoy's direction.

He was going to have to blow a bit harder to get the range he needed.

The first attempt dropped short, falling into Hermione and Hannah's cauldron. Instantly, the potion changed from pale brown to powder blue, and Hermione moaned in dismay at the unexpected change, scanning the instructions to see where they had gone wrong. Harry felt a stab of guilt for Hannah.

His second attempt found the target. Malfoy slapped a hand to his forehead, pulling away the slimy spit ball. He leaned in close, frowning at the little lump of paper, and his face contorted in disgust. He looked up, scanning the room with an annoyed scowl. Unable to spot the culprit, he flicked the spit ball at the nearest Gryffindor and wiped the hand with a towel that sat on his bench.

As soon as he went back to his work, Harry blew another one, hitting him in exactly the same spot.

"Who the hell is doing that!" yelled Malfoy, startling the class.

"What is wrong, Mr. Malfoy?" asked Snape, walking over to the Slytherin.

"Someone keeps throwing... spit balls at me!"

Several class members broke out in giggles, but were swiftly silenced by Snape. "If I see another spit ball fly-"

He broke off as one hit him smack bang on the nose.

The class held a collective breath.

“That is it! Whoever is doing that will have detention for a month!”

Harry let out a muffled snort, squashing himself to the wall of the painting.

In the silence, the class heard, turning to look at his side of the room. Puzzled muttering broke out as Snape roared. “Peeves! I shall have the Bloody Baron on you if you do not leave this instant!”

Silence greeted his words, and Harry let out a loud raspberry. Snape scowled, convinced the Poltergeist was tormenting him and his students. He looked about. “Mr. Finnigan. You have clearly failed this exercise. Kindly fetch the Bloody Baron. You will find him in the North Tower at this time of day, I believe.”

Seamus’ potion was powder blue too; having being hit by one of Harry’s spit balls. In fact, as Harry looked around the classroom, he noted that the only potion he hadn’t tainted was Malfoy’s.

-

Seamus left and Snape turned to inspect the rest of the class, realising the same thing. “Today’s lesson will not be marked. Pack up and get out.” Snape swept into his office and slammed the door behind him and the class scrambled to pack up, eager to vacate the room. Harry watched as they left.

Suddenly, a shadow was cast over him. He looked up and jumped. Malfoy was standing inches from him, looking intently at the shadow in the painting. Even though Harry was sure Malfoy couldn’t see him, it was still unnerving to have the Slytherin staring directly at him.

“I know you’re in there Potter,” Malfoy hissed. “You shoot one more spit ball at me ever again and you’ll regret it!”

“Yes, sir!”

Malfoy jerked back a bit at the prompt reply.

“Jumpy, aren’t we? Weren’t you expecting an answer?”

Malfoy scowled, and spun, striding over to the door. Just before he left the classroom, he turned back to the painting. “Come up and meet me.” He left, slamming the door behind him.

His spirits considerably lightened, Harry leaned forward and tipped himself out of the painting, landing on all fours on the floor. He stood up, extracting the pendant, and five seconds later he was in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. Five minutes later Malfoy came through the door, stopping when he spotted Harry.

“How’d you get here so fast?”

“What took you so long?”

Harry led the way back down to the chamber.

Once they were seated on the lunge, Malfoy spoke. “Is there any particular reason why you missed class today?”

Harry shrugged. “No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“You do realise Snape doesn’t look kindly on people skipping his classes, don’t you?”

Harry shrugged again. “He’ll get over it.”

“Yeah, after you’ve served detention and lost house points.”

“You should be glad about Gryffindor losing points.”

“Oh, believe me, I am. You should know that as a prefect, I’m permitted to take points. I consider being spattered with spit balls near the top of my list of reasons to take points.”

-

“Take points from me and you can say goodbye to the Chamber.”

“I thought as much.”

“Glad we’re on the same level.”

“Are you planning on coming to Astronomy tonight, or are you going to miss that, too?”

“No, I’ll probably come. I like astronomy.”

“So why didn’t you come to Potions?”

“I didn’t feel like it. I had an argument with Ron and Hermione.”

“I thought she looked particularly depressed today. I mean, I would if I was mudblood, but today was not usual for her.”

For once, Harry didn’t fight Malfoy’s use of the word. It would be a little hypocritical, after all.

“Must have been a pretty bad fight if you’re not even going to defend her. You usually get all pissed off when I say mudblood.”

“Yeah, well, not today.”

...

After Astronomy, Harry returned to the chamber alone and fell asleep in the room of requirement on a huge king-size bed.

oOo

He woke early on Saturday and apparated to the kitchens and back to the chamber with a hearty breakfast. The Ravenclaw versus Hufflepuff match was on today, but he didn’t really feel like going. Quidditch just didn’t hold the same appeal when you weren’t going to



watch the match with your friends, and Harry had the feeling that after yesterday there would be very few of his friends not angry at him.

He spent all day completing any homework and assignments he had, then devoted Sunday to studying from books in the Chamber. So far, he had learned the incantations and wand movements to a fair few Dark Arts curses, and practiced the counters to them.

oOO

On Monday morning Harry finally left the Chamber, going to breakfast in the Great Hall. Luckily, it was very early and the few early birds didn't even look up when he came in quietly. He had just served himself breakfast when:

"Potter." Snape's smooth voice spoke above him.

Harry looked up and choked on his cereal. Here was proof that not only did Snape not own a bottle of shampoo, but a mirror either! Just above his ear, tangled in the greasy black strands of hair was a single white spit ball.

-

Snape narrowed his eyes as Harry spluttered and sniffed disdainfully. "You missed my class Friday, Potter."

Harry tried to focus on Snape's face, but his eyes couldn't help but flick up to the spot of white in Snape's hair.

"What is wrong with you Potter?"

"Nothing, sir." His voice shook with the effort of not laughing.

"I take it you do not have an acceptable reason for your absence?"

"Not really, sir."

"Then you will receive detention."

“Yes, sir.”

“Also, you are to accompany me to the Headmaster’s office to discuss your recent behaviour.”

Harry felt the blood drain from his face. He really didn’t want to talk to Dumbledore about it. Shoving his cereal away, he stood and followed Snape from the Great Hall and up to the Stone Gargoyle that guarded the headmaster’s office.

“Snapping Crackles,” said Snape, a sneer in his voice.

The door opened and Harry stood on the moving staircase behind Snape. All too soon for Harry, they reached the top and Snape strode in to Dumbledore’s office. Harry followed at a more sedate pace.

He followed Snape’s lead and stood before Dumbledore’s desk. The wizened wizard fixed him with a weary stare. “Harry. Once again, I am glad to see you are okay. However, I am not sure that you are. There are several matters that we need to discuss.” Dumbledore looked to the Potions Master, indicating to a chair, and Snape took a seat. Harry, feeling particularly uneasy as he alone stood, shuffled his feet, staring at his shoes. He felt himself slip into the meditative breathing Snape had shown him, building a barrier of darkness in his mind.

Dumbledore did not ask him to sit. “We shall begin with where you have been the last three days.

Harry looked up, a frown on his face. “Here, sir.”

“I know that is not true, Harry. You missed Professor Snape’s class on Friday and have not been seen until this morning. I would like you to tell us where you have been.”

“I’ve been at school! It isn’t true at all that no one has seen me. I was in Astronomy on Friday night. The whole class saw me, plus Professor Zagartes called a roll.”

“And over the weekend?”

Harry shrugged. I spent some time in the library, went flying. The usual."

"You were not seen in your dormitory on Friday, Saturday or Sunday night."

-

"I haven't been sleeping much."

"Even so, you should have been in your common room after curfew."

"I was."

Snape slapped the table. "Do not lie to us! If you had been there, you would have been seen!"

Harry ignored Snape's attitude and answered in an infuriating tone; "Not if I was under my invisibility cloak." He returned Snape's scowl.

Dumbledore spoke. "That may fool those who would otherwise have seen you, but it would not fool this." From the top drawer of his desk, Dumbledore pulled one of Harry's most treasure possessions; the Marauder's Map.

Harry jumped to his feet. "Where did you get that!?"

"I would ask you please to sit down, Harry."

"No! That map is mine. You have no right to take one of my personal things!"

Dumbledore held up a hand to stall Harry. "I assure you I did not remove it from your belongings. It was brought to me by your dorm mates, who grew worried when you did not turn up on Saturday."

Harry snorted. To him, that sounded like pretty much the same thing. Dumbledore had the map and it didn't matter how he had gotten it.

‘You see Harry, this is how I know you were not in your common room, under the cloak or otherwise. In fact, the Map indicated that you were not even in the castle, nor on the grounds.’

“Like I told you already, I didn’t leave the school.”

“Then how do explain not being on the Map, Potter?” spat Snape.

Harry sat stupidly for a moment, looking between Dumbledore and Snape. “Erm...”

He couldn’t tell them about the Chamber, it was his only place of refuge.

“Harry...” prompted Dumbledore. “Do you have an explanation for us?”

“Fine! I wasn’t in my dorm after curfew. Give me detention.” He sat down hard, crossing his arms and glaring.

“What is most worrying Harry, is that you did not appear on the map at all. You were not in the castle. Your friends Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley have come to me before with the same observation.”

Harry’s glare deepened at that. A sudden idea occurred to him. “There are plenty of places on the map where you won’t show up. The Marauders didn’t know about every secret passage way and room in the castle, one of which is the Room of Requirement. If I want somewhere to be alone, why shouldn’t I be allowed to go without people checking up on me?”

-

Dumbledore and Snape exchanged a look, silently gauging whether Harry’s answer was truthful or not.

“You are telling us the truth, Harry? You have been in the Room of Requirement?”

Harry gave a sharp nod. "I wasn't there the whole time. I went to the kitchens for food." He had a thought. "You can ask Malfoy, he saw me."

Dumbledore and Snape exchanged another look, and Harry didn't miss the almost imperceptible nod Snape gave the headmaster.

"Very well. I will ask you to refrain from going there after curfew. All students are required to be in their common room after hours, excepting the prefects."

"Fine," he replied tightly.

"The second matter I wish to discuss with you is your outing to Hogsmeade."

Harry's stomach leapt and he shot a nasty look at Snape, who raised an eyebrow.

"What about it sir?"

"You were told explicitly not to go, Potter."

"No, I was requested not to attend. A request I declined to abide by."

For the first time since Harry had arrived in the office, Dumbledore looked angry. "It was a request made for your protection!"

"Well that's my lookout, isn't it? Everyone else is allowed to go!"

"As usual Potter, you consider yourself above the rules. Even if you were not in danger, you do not have a permission slip signed by your parents!"

Snape realised his mistake at once.

"Funny that, seeing as they're DEAD!"

"I meant guardians, of course." Snape looked slightly uneasy.

“Harry, not only did you leave after I asked you not to, but Professor Snape tells me you met with someone not a student at this school.”

Harry shrugged. He had lied so many times he couldn't remember what all the lies were, and now he was going to have to lie again. “He's just a friend. I just happened to run into him. It really shouldn't be an issue.”

“Be that as it may, Potter, you were somewhere you were not supposed to be, with a stranger. Had you gone missing, we would not have known what happened to you, perhaps until it was too late.”

“He wasn't a stranger to me! He's trustworthy. No offence, but going by previous experience, you headmaster, are not a very good judge of character in that respect.”

-

“Potter!” gasped Snape, affronted. “You will not talk to the headmaster in such a manner!”

“Well it's the truth.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I have made mistakes Harry, I admit it. However, my mistakes are not the issue at hand.”

“Fine! I'll be in my common room after curfew and I won't leave the castle. Can I go now?”

“Not just yet. There is one last matter I wish to discuss. It has come to my attention that you have had a falling out with Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger.”

Harry's nostrils flared and he looked away.

“It particularly concerns me that you felt the need to insult Miss Granger.”

“Yeah, well, they insulted me first.”

“So badly that you resorted to calling one of your best friends one of the worst names you could? Growing up as you did among muggles, I do not believe you fully comprehend the insult the word carries.”

“I was angry, alright? And I didn’t say it with the intent of insulting her exactly. I was making a point.”

“Oh?”

“They have a problem with me being a Parseltongue. Friends are supposed to accept each other, not side with everyone else. I was simply pointing out to them that if they wanted to do that, then I was capable of the same thing.”

“I see. Do you think it wise to be demonstrating your ability so openly, given that people are disturbed by it?”

“It’s who I am. I’m not going to change and I’m not going to hide anymore.”

Dumbledore inclined his head to Harry. “It is my greatest wish for you to be comfortable with yourself, my boy. I, and your friends only want you to be happy.”

“Happy?” yelled Harry. “How can I when you people don’t even want me to be me; you want me to be Harry Potter, Boy-Who-Lived. Well guess what! This boy’s had enough!”

“Do not be ridiculous, Potter! Sit down!”

“No, I don’t think I will. I have nothing more to say.”

“Very well Harry. You may go, but please remember this talk. I do not want to see you disobeying rules put in place for your protection again,” said Dumbledore.

“Fine.” Harry turned to go, but then stopped. “If I could have my map,” he said to Dumbledore.

“The map will stay with me, for the time being.”

-

Harry fumed. "You can't take it away from me!"

"Yes, Harry, I can. Many students have items confiscated. As Professor Snape previously said, you are not above the rules."

"Students have items confiscated because they're on the banned list or being used inappropriately. You went into my trunk and removed it without my permission. Two completely different things!"

"That does not change my decision to confiscate it. You may go."

Harry ground his teeth, breathing heavily. He spun to leave. "GAH!" he yelled, punching the wall on the way out. The punch opened up a split on his knuckle that he had gotten from his tantrum in the chamber.

He stormed down the staircase, sucking on the bleeding knuckle. He made his way to Gryffindor Tower to collect his books. It was already empty, as classes were due to start any minute. By the time he reached defence, he was late and he received a deduction of ten points from Snape. Scowling, he took the only remaining seat at the very front and middle of the class, trying to ignore the stares of his classmates. The entire lesson, Harry could feel their eyes prickling the back of his neck. His hands were killing him and he could hardly write. He'd not noticed it before, but in addition to the bruising and cuts, they were slightly swelled.

He endured it through defence and charms, but when the bell rang for lunch, Harry left the class and went to the infirmary where Madam Pomfrey healed his hands. After a quick lunch in the kitchens, Harry headed off to transfiguration, taking a seat at the back of the class. The rest of the class filed in, several students shooting him curious and sometimes disgusted looks. Harry supposed people either hated him for it or were wondering if it was true at all. When McGonagall came in, she gave him a troubled look.



After the lecture, they were set to work on the assignment in groups. Harry was sure no one was going to approach him when Pandora appeared at his table. "Hi Harry!" she said brightly.

"Hi Pandora..." He had been sure Pandora would be one of those angry at him, friends as she was with Ron and Hermione.

"Want to work together?" she asked.

"Er... have you heard?"

"Don't worry, Harry. I have an open mind about these things. I don't hold it against you."

Harry frowned thoughtfully. For someone who had openly displayed a dislike of the Slytherins after only a short time at Hogwarts, she certainly seemed unbelievably accepting of the fact that he could speak Parseltongue. "Well er... thanks, Pandora. I really appreciate that."

"Although, I do think what you said to Ron and Hermione was a bit harsh. Maybe you should apologise to them?"

Harry glared at Pandora. "Mind your own business! I'm not apologising to them until they apologise to me."

-

Pandora held up her hands defensively. "Okay, okay." She gave a grin. "Just a suggestion."

They set to work transfiguring a rug into an octopus.

oOo

Dinner that night was a tense affair. Harry sat beside Pandora, who had insisted they sit with Ron and Hermione. Only Pandora had spoken the entire time, keeping up a string of lively conversation. Harry had his detention with Snape tonight, and gratefully left the table when he had finished eating.

As Harry made his way from the Great Hall, he was accosted by Malfoy.

"Well, Potter. I thought I might congratulate you."

"Stuff off Malfoy."

Malfoy tisked. "I wouldn't talk to me like that if I were you, Potter."

"Why the hell shouldn't I?"

"I think I'm your only friend right now, Potter."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realise we were friends. I distinctly recall you saying we weren't and never would be," retorted Harry sarcastically.

"Hey, don't get snarky with me. Besides, you know what I mean. I'm the only one willing to talk to you right now."

"Only because you want something from me."

Malfoy gave a casual shrug. "We all want something from other people. Does it really matter?"

"I'm tired of people using me for their own gain."

"You were using me for yours."

"What gain could I possibly get from you? All I wanted was company."

"And that's what you got."

"Yeah, well. Not very desirable company in the end."

Malfoy shrugged again. "I didn't ask you to pick me."

At that point they arrived at Snape's office and Malfoy continued on to his common room while Harry knocked on the office door.

Snape made him scrub cauldrons for an hour before telling him to stop.

“Before you go Potter, I have something to tell you.”

Harry looked at the Potions Master expectantly.

-

“The headmaster and I have been discussing the problem with your visions, and decided on the course that must be taken.”

“You’ve found a way to stop them?”

“Possibly. We won’t know until we have actually attempted it, but if our reasoning is correct then there is every chance it will stop, or in the very least diminish your visions.”

“But we thought Occlumency would help. Instead my visions have just been getting worse.”

“The mind seeks knowledge Potter. Occlumency is about training your mind, learning to control it. In doing so, it is becoming easier for your mind to subconsciously seek out the information it desires.”

“You mean I’m not blocking them purposely?! But I don’t want to see those things or feel those things!”

“Quite obviously a part of you does, and so your subconscious mind seeks out the only way it knows to obtain answers.”

“But how do we stop that?”

“With continued training.”

Harry slumped. “The visions are only getting worse the more I continue to learn. Won’t that just keep happening?”

“I am not talking of Occlumency. Occlumency is the practice of blocking attacks on your mind, schooling your own thoughts and

emotions. What you are doing is seeking out the mind of one you have a connection with. I am talking about-

"Legilimency..." breathed Harry, looking up at his teacher.

"Yes. Most people have to work to open a connection between their mind and another's, and it usually requires eye contact. It would seem, however, that you share a unique bond with the Dark Lord that you must learn to close. Before we begin study of that discipline however, you must become at least competent in Occlumency. Legilimency is by far the harder and more complex of the two, and requires prior formal training in the mind arts."

"So you're saying until I'm good enough at Occlumency, I just have to put up with these visions?"

Snape gave a short nod. "Unless we find some other way to break the connection."

Harry kicked the desk. "Great."

"I would appreciate it if you refrained from abusing my property, Mr. Potter."

oOo

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## REVIEWERS

Thank you all sooo much. I'm always worried that I'm going to post a chapter and people will hate it, but so far so good!

Voldemort is Dead: Thanks for reviewing, as usual : )

Kaeim: Woohoo! Thanks!

rellenh: Thanks for the review : )

Vanessa riddle: Hehe : ) I tend to get obsessed with good stories and get so frustrated waiting for updates.

Roxoan: Too lazy! No way! Nice review, thanks : )

Fhippogriff: Thanks for reviewing, I can always count on you : )

Jensindenial3516: Thanks! Glad you liked it.

jc: Thank you : ) Hope you keep liking the story.

Stuff happens...

When Snape finally released him from detention, Harry left the office and wound his way deeper in to the dungeons, seeking a place to set Salz loose for food. He had begun to bring the little snake with him on a regular basis again, partly because he was fairly certain everyone had forgotten about him and partly because he was someone to talk to.

He lit his wand; this deep into the dungeons, there were no torches lit because there was no reason for anyone to come down here.

Finding a place to sit Harry let Salazar crawl down his arm and onto the floor to hunt for mice. The little snake slithered off, leaving Harry alone to think.

As he sat, Harry thought about what Snape had said, adding the map to his mental list of belongings to retrieve. He was fairly certain that soon he would be able to get the book and map back; there was no way he was leaving on the holidays without the map especially. Now that he knew a way to get into Dumbledore's office, it shouldn't be a problem to get it back, as long as the headmaster wasn't carrying it on him. All he needed to do was get a little bit better at Occlumency.

Leaning back against the wall and closing his eyes, he cleared his mind and put his barrier in place, making the darkness as deep and all encompassing as he could.

oOo

The next day, Harry stuck with Pandora. He was off-side with everyone else he normally spoke to. When he had gone down to the common room in the morning, he'd seen Hermione and Ron. Hermione had given him a tearful look, but when Ron saw him, the red-head glared and turned away, pulling Hermione with him. Harry had set his jaw and continued out the portrait hole to breakfast.

He spent the afternoon after Herbology with Pandora, who seemed determined to keep Harry company. For once, Harry was appreciative

of her company, and they spent their time chatting amiably and working on their Defence essay.

He needed to complete his Potions essay as well, but he was having trouble and Potions wasn't Pandora's strong suit either. He set it aside to work on the next time he was in the chamber with Malfoy.

-

If there was one benefit to spending time with Malfoy, it was that he was getting better marks in Potions. The Slytherin was probably near-if not at- the top of the class, and couldn't seem to stand Harry writing anything less than 100 accurate in his essays.

...

That night at dinner Harry looked across the Great Hall at the Slytherin table, locating Malfoy easily. The boy was always at the centre of attention, Pansy at his right and Crabbe and Goyle to his left, with a mob of students hanging on his every word.

Looking back every now and then, he eventually met Malfoy's gaze. Harry tipped his head to the side and raised his eyebrows questioningly. Malfoy gave no indication that he understood, but Harry knew the boy would be there if he wanted to be.

When he had finished his desert, he looked over at Pandora. She was nowhere near finished, and was chatting to Neville on her other side. Quietly as he could, he slipped away from the bench, thankful that no one was talking to him and so didn't call out good bye.

Luckily, Pandora didn't notice his exit and he made his way to the corridor of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

He was nearly there when he was halted by someone calling his name. Turning on the spot, he saw Dumbledore walking towards him, his bright purple robes flowing around his feet.

"Yes, sir?"

"I was just heading back to my office when I spotted you ahead of me. How was your dinner? I particularly enjoyed the plum pudding."

"Fine sir," he replied shortly. It annoyed him a great deal that Dumbledore could act in such a friendly manner when Harry was so angry at him.

Dumbledore noticed his tone and gave him a grandfatherly sort of look. "Harry, I regret that I considered it necessary to relieve you of your father's map, but I felt that it was in your best interests at his time."

Harry pursed his lips. "How so, sir?"

"Times are dangerous. It does not do to be wandering where you shouldn't."

"I thought the castle was supposed to be safe. Although," Harry continued, a sarcastic edge entering his voice, "I guess if you've hired any teachers with a hidden agenda it might not be."

The grandfatherly look flickered for a moment. "Harry... you must understand-"

At that point, Harry heard steps behind him and watched from the corner of his eye as Malfoy passed them, nodding politely at Dumbledore. "Good evening, sir."

"Good Evening, Mr. Malfoy."

Harry watched Malfoy's retreating back with a scowl on his face, which Dumbledore misinterpreted.

-

"Harry, do you remember what the hat told us at the beginning of the year?"

Harry scowled at the change of subject. "Which part?"



“Together we are stronger. You do not have to befriend or even like Mr. Malfoy, but a show of tolerance would be beneficial, especially as an example to the younger years.”

“Have you seen us fighting this year? I am tolerant, and certainly not aggressive.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Then perhaps being polite would not be remiss of you.”

Harry was distracted then by the sound of more footsteps. He was itching to get away from Dumbledore and down to the chamber.

Dumbledore beamed happily at the approaching figure at the same time that Harry’s frustration levels soared. “Ah, here is Miss Noksmlyth. Well, I must be going and I’m sure you have homework, Harry. Good evening Miss Noksmlyth.”

“Evening sir!” said Pandora brightly. “Heya Harry, I didn’t see you leave the Great Hall. You should have told me and I would have come.”

Harry fought to keep the anger out of his voice. “I thought you’d want to finish your dessert.”

Dumbledore gave another smile and walked off, and Pandora took Harry’s arm and started to drag him off in the direction of Gryffindor Tower. “So do you want to work on assignments or have the night off? We could play exploding snap. Maybe ask Ron and Mione.”

Harry stopped dead, tugging his arm away. “Look Pandora, I was just on my way somewhere, and in case you haven’t noticed, Ron and Hermione and I aren’t exactly on speaking terms at the moment.”

Pandora gave him a sad look. “Well, if you don’t want to go to the common room just yet, I suppose we could just walk around, or go to the library.”

Harry gave a deep sigh. "I just want to be on my own, alright. I really appreciate you still talking to me, but I just don't want company right now."

"I don't think you should be alone right now, Harry," said Pandora, a concerned look on her face.

"And I think it would be nice if people listened to me for once. Nothing is going to happen to me walking around the castle. Besides, I won't be alone, so there's need for you to worry at all."

Pandora looked interested. "Oh? Who are you meeting? I could come..."

"Look! I don't want you to come. I'm meeting someone I know you don't like, so I don't think it would be a good idea. Just go back to the Tower and play exploding snap with Ron and Hermione like you wanted to." Harry spun and walked off down the corridor, looking back as he rounded the corner.

Pandora was standing with a troubled expression, and he felt a bit guilty for talking so harshly, but it seemed like the only way to get through to her sometimes. Knowing her though, she'd be over it and laughing in five minutes.

-

He just hoped she wouldn't try to follow him. She was very persistent. Having a sudden idea, he stepped through a door pretending to be solid wall and waited two minutes before stepping back through. The way was empty and he took off at a fast walk for Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, hoping the impatient Slytherin was still waiting.

Very shortly he arrived to find an irritated Malfoy pacing restlessly outside the door. "Took you long enough, Potter. I have better things to do with my time than wait around while you chat with the headmaster."

"Don't piss me off Malfoy. I'm really not in the mood. Pandora wanted to come with me and I had to get rid of her."

"That girl is starting to annoy me. She seems like a bit of a hanger-on to me."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, after a bit of Potter glory, smitten with the wizarding world's hero."

"Nah, she's not like that. Just overly friendly. It gets a bit annoying."

"I can only imagine."

The cool air of the chamber cooled Harry's temper, and with each step he took, he relaxed further.

They took seats at opposite ends of the lounge, Harry searching in his bag for a quill and his Potions essay.

"So Potter, what possessed you to use the 'm' word? I didn't think you had it in you."

"Leave it alone Malfoy."

The Slytherin ignored him, inspecting his nails as he spoke.

"I'm quite impressed, really. Granger deserves to be put in her place, and she's never listened to me, despite my obvious charm and charisma."

Harry snorted. "You're so full of yourself."

"Only with good reason, and don't try and change the subject. I want to know what Granger and Weasley did to provoke you."

Harry sighed exasperatedly and looked up at Malfoy. "They have a problem with me speaking Parseltongue, just like everyone else seems to."

"It is considered Dark Arts. Not the sort of thing people like to hear coming from a pure little Gryffindor."

"That's not the point. They're my friends, they aren't supposed to care."

"If you were in Slytherin you'd know that you can't trust even your friends."

"Six months ago, I wouldn't have believed you."

-

...

An hour later, Harry finally finished his essay (after much input from Malfoy) and he sighed with relief as he rolled it and deposited it on the table.

"Want to practice some duelling?" asked Malfoy.

"Hmm... I was thinking of doing something else actually."

"What did you have in mind?"

Harry closed his book and sat forward. "I want to become an animagus."

Malfoy frowned thoughtfully. "Really? It takes a while to learn, you know."

"I know, but I really want to do it. Don't you?"

"I guess, it would be a good skill to have. We should only do it if we're going to commit to it and see it through though."

Harry nodded. "I've wanted to do it for ages. I was going to ask Ron and Hermione, but..."

“Well, I’m up for it. It’ll be excellent being able to fly without a broom, and breathe fire.”

“Still convinced you’ll be a dragon then?”

“Yes.”

Harry got off the lounge and picked his bag off the floor, searching through it for the book on animagi he had found in the chamber earlier in the year. He pulled it out and went over to the table, opening it to the page he wanted.

“I found this book about animagi. It has instructions for how to make the transformation.”

Malfoy snapped his own book shut and stalked over to look at Harry’s.  
“You found it in here?”

“Yeah. It’s pretty good; it’s got a heap of history and some good instructions.” Harry fell silent as they both leaned over to read the page Harry had opened to.

The process of becoming an animagus can take as little as several months or many years, depending on the amount of time given to the endeavour.

The first step is often the most difficult, requiring great concentration, effort and persistence.

Begin by clearing the mind and focussing entirely on the body. Imagine that the body is morphing into its animal form. It may take many attempts before the first changes occur, but the further the transformation progresses, the easier it becomes to further transform.

There is no sure way of knowing what animal form will be assumed until the first steps of the change have been made and animalistic features such as beaks, claws or feathers have been identified.

Once some feature has been identified, a wizard will have a better idea of their form and therefore a clearer image in their mind to use when envisioning the transformation.

Only one stage of the transformation should be attempted at a time until the transformation is complete. Once the first stage is complete, the wizard should try to determine what their animal form is and envisage a particular next step. For example, if the first change is the appearance of feathers, it is likely their animal will also have a beak, and so that would be a logical image to work with for the next step of transformation. If after multiple attempts a wizard is unable to achieve this next stage, it is possible that the wrong animal has been determined.

The rest of the chapter went on in the same vein, detailing methods and guidelines, as well as things that could go wrong. Harry looked up when he was finished to see that Malfoy had already completed the passage and was waiting for him.

They each found a spot to sit quietly, Harry settling on the floor near the window. He sat cross-legged, leaning against the window and began to clear his mind like he did when he was practicing Occlumency. Almost automatically, the barrier of impenetrable blackness sprang up in his mind. He let it remain in the background while he focussed on every part of his body, every finger and every toe. When he had an image in his mind of himself sitting there, he began to imagine that his body was changing, trying to imagine how it would look and feel.

He had absolutely no idea what form his animal would take, so he tried not to imagine his body changing into anything specific; instead, he pictured his limbs and features shifting slightly, then returning to normal.

...

Harry opened his eyes later with the feeling he may have fallen asleep a few times. He looked at his watch and was surprised to see he had been there for over two hours. Yawning and stretching, he climbed stiffly to his feet.

He walked quietly over to the table glancing at the other boy, who also appeared to have fallen asleep sitting up. He scrawled a quick note to Malfoy and put it on the floor in front of him, then left the chamber through the passage that led to the Slytherin Common Room. He had a quick stop to make before he went back to Gryffindor Tower.

oOo

On Saturday night, Harry was eating alone when he noticed several teachers leave as one from the head table. Getting up, he followed them up to the headmaster's office. He had found that smaller Order meetings were held in Dumbledore's office rather than at Grimmauld Place.

He stopped at a distance and waited until the corridor was clear before apparating to the waterfall painting and going to the landscape in Dumbledore's office. He had taken to carrying the cloak with him in case Dumbledore decided that anymore of his belongings needed to be removed, in addition to putting a nasty spell on his trunk that, if anyone but him attempted to open the trunk, would cover a person in painful boils. It was a Parseltongue spell, so he was fairly certain that even Dumbledore would have trouble removing it.

-

He walked quietly past Phineas Nigellus, who was watching the proceedings in the office, and edged into the landscape of Hogwarts castle and grounds. Taking a seat in the sun, he watched as teachers and a few others settled themselves. The usual teachers were there, as well as Owens, one of the aurors guarding the school, Tonks, Kingsley, Arthur Weasley and Mad-Eye Moody.

Harry tuned into the conversation.

"Owens, have you succeeded in following Harry?

"I've tried, but he seems to just disappear."

This was news to Harry. He hadn't realised someone had been following him. He would have to be more careful in the future.

"Yes, it is worrying. Tonks, have you had any luck discovering Harry's whereabouts in the time he disappears?"

Harry's mouth dropped open. Tonks was following him? She must have been wearing an invisibility cloak or disillusionment charm! He couldn't bring himself to be angry at Tonks. She had always been nice to him and was only acting on Dumbledore's orders, after all.

"No, I haven't, but it certainly isn't this Room of Requirement you told me about. He doesn't go near it, far as I can tell. What worries me is that I've seen him talking to the Malfoy boy. Harry's never indicated to me that they're friends."

"They are partnered in Potions and defence, most likely they are discussing that." Snape snorted. "They most certainly are not friends."

"No," Dumbledore agreed. "I noticed Harry's reaction to merely seeing Mr. Malfoy the other night. They certainly don't appear to be friendly, even if they are being civil."

"Even so, I don't think he should be hanging around Lucius Malfoy's son," said Tonks.

Snape spoke, a scowl in his voice. "Draco is no threat, Nymphadora."

It was Tonk's turn to scowl. "You think you know him so well, Snape? How do you know he's not going to lure Harry out of the wards on one of your little defence practicals?"

"Even Mr. Potter is not so stupid--"

"Harry acts first and thinks later! How did they even get partnered together!?"

"It was their choice."



Concerned muttering broke out as Moody spoke. "Why would they choose to go together?"

"Much as it pains me to say, Mr. Potter is the best defence student in this school. Mr. Malfoy is not far off. Partnering with each other was a strategy to ensure their standing in the class."

-

Moody spoke again. "I still think it's fishy. I have to agree with Tonks here. Split 'em up. We don't want Malfoy having some influence on Potter, and if you ask me he already has. I might also point out that the times Malfoy is with Potter is in your classes, Snape."

Murmurs of agreement ran through the room. "What is it that you are insinuating exactly, Moody?"

"Nothing at all, Snape. I'm simply pointing out that you're allowing contact which most of us find concerning."

"Be that as it may, you will not tell me how to run my class," replied Snape in a deadly voice.

Mr. Weasley broke the tense atmosphere with a change of subject.

"Ron wrote a concerning letter too Molly and I this week. It seems he has had a falling out with Harry. I know teenage boys are bound to fight, but what was said quite concerns me."

"I'm sure things will work out. Harry is going through a difficult time, but he always pulls through."

"Albus, Harry is like a son to Molly and I. If any harm comes to him..."

Harry felt a rush of gratitude and happiness towards Mr. And Mrs. Weasley.

"Have no fear, Arthur. We are doing what we can to ensure Harry's safety."

Soon after that, the meeting disbanded and Harry returned to Gryffindor for an early night, determined to continue to evade those following him.

oOo

Harry woke early on Sunday morning with a pounding headache and sharp shooting pains in his scar. He had suffered a terrible vision the night before, and his body was really feeling the effects. He stumbled from bed and looked out the window. It was only six o'clock, and the grounds were still quite dark.

He pulled on some clothes and forced himself to walk, staggering down the stairs and out the portrait hole. He really didn't like Snape, but if the man could stop the pain, he would willingly risk his wrath by waking him early on a Sunday morning. What Harry needed was some more of the Post-cruciatu's potion Snape had given him.

Taking much longer than usual, Harry finally made it to the dungeons, desperately hoping Snape was up already, despite the early hour. He knocked repeatedly on the office door before determining Snape wasn't there, and slumped against the wall, straining to remember where Snape's private chambers were. Unfortunately, that wasn't somewhere Harry had ever needed nor desired to go, and he didn't want to spend ages stumbling around the dungeons in pain.

Grimacing as he struggled to his feet, he turned to face the door, leaning heavily on the wall. Like most offices and dormitories, it required a password to open the portrait that hung on the door.

Thanking God that Snape was a Slytherin and that his office was in Slytherin territory, Harry hissed "Open" and sighed in relief as the door popped open. He stepped into the office, closing the door -

gently behind him. He had no idea where Snape might keep the potion, but thought the private stores would be a good place to start.

He sat in Snape's chair and tried the top drawer. Locked.

He tried alohamora and 'open' in Parseltongue, but neither worked. Obviously the desk wasn't as old as the castle and Snape knew a better locking spell than alohamora.

"Having trouble?"

Harry jumped about a foot in the air, swearing loudly.

"Language, Potter." Snape was leaning casually against the door frame, looking like Christmas had come early. When Harry looked up at him however, the expression dropped almost immediately and Snape straightened.

"Merlin Potter, you look atrocious. What happened to you?"

"Vision," Harry grunted, suddenly not able to find the energy to lift himself from the chair.

"And so you chose to raid my office?" said Snape, striding over and opening the top drawer with a whispered word. He pulled out a vial and Harry recognised the blue liquid.

With shaking hands, he attempted to pull the cork, but he gave up when he nearly dropped the vial. Huffing, Snape snatched it back and pulled the cork with a pop, handing it back to Harry who greedily swallowed the potion.

After a moment of silence, Snape spoke. "How is it that you gained entrance to my office without suffering any adverse effects?"

Harry declined to answer, relishing the feeling as pain began to fade from his limbs. He felt Snape's mind glide across his, but couldn't even begin to resist it before it was gone.

"Interesting...I take it that is how you managed to get into the Slytherin Common Room without a password?"

Harry nodded wearily.

"I see... and you recently removed that infernal banner?"

Harry gave another nod as Snape sat opposite him and fixed him with a contemplative stare.

“Be sure that I will be adding extra wards to my office and chambers... what spell is it that you used to stick it there? Despite my best efforts I was unable to remove it.”

Harry opened his eyes. “Er... Parseltongue spell.” He grinned. “I thought it appropriate.”

To Harry’s surprise, Snape smirked. “Indeed.”

The Potions Master stood. “However, I think it time to warn you. It would be prudent to watch who you use such spells around. Even the Dark Lord, despite extensive efforts, has been unable to find more than a few such spells. Granted they are rare. Thus far, it has not come to his attention you -

know of Parselmagic, but should he find out, the consequences could be quite dire. It would give him yet more reason to catch you.”

Harry frowned. “I never even thought of that...”

Snape snorted, his glare back in place. “I don’t doubt that. Until you are sufficiently accomplished at wordless spells, it would be good to refrain from using Parselmagic in the vicinity of any other students. Even if they are not related to a Death Eater themselves, people will talk and the word will spread.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now off with you, and if you break into my office again I will deduct points.”

“Yes sir.” Harry climbed to his feet and moved towards the door. He paused at the doorway. “Er...sir?”

Snape looked up from his desk. “Yes?”

“Thankyou.”

Snape gave a brief sneer. “No thanks is needed, Be gone.”

oOo

That night, Harry met Malfoy and they went down to the chamber.

“Thanks for taking down that banner by the way.”

“No problem. If only Snape had given me points for it.”

Malfoy grinned. “Well, I guess that isn’t too likely to happen, is it?”

“Not in this lifetime.”

“Occlumency tonight?” asked Harry.

Malfoy nodded. “I had a lesson with Severus yesterday, and I really think I’m getting better at controlling the flow of memories.”

“I think I’m improving too, though I don’t know how well I’ll do tonight. I had a shocking sleep last night.”

They took their usual places and began the normal routine. Harry had been right in thinking he wouldn’t be much use. He erected his barrier, but Malfoy broke it down quickly. Images flew through Harry’s mind, Malfoy attempting to grab on to one for more than an instant. He had definitely improved.

Memories of his vision last night were at the forefront of Harry’s mind, and it was onto one of these that Malfoy latched.

-

Harry watched again as Voldemort punished a Death Eater. The man was one of the Azkaban escapees, still weak from over a decade in the prison. He had failed whatever task Voldemort had asked of him, and was now suffering the consequences. The Dark Lord cast

cruciatu after cruciatu, and Harry remembered how the curse had felt.

The man left off with that curse and began sending bits of glass from his wand at the man, tiny slivers slicing through his skin and into his flesh, and then exiting his body on the opposite side they had entered. Eventually, the man slumped dead to the ground, his blank eyes staring emptily at the sky as a maniacal laugh rang through the cold stone room...

Harry gasped as Malfoy pulled out of his mind. The Slytherin was white, his eyes wide as he stared at Harry. "What the fuck was that?"

Harry shrugged and looked away. "A dream."

"Bullshit!" Malfoy sneered. "That was no dream – that happened, and you were there."

Harry shot a suspicious look at him. "How do you know it happened?"

"My father told me Scotchwell was to be punished.. the detail... you couldn't possibly have known those things... and it was like you were... him."

Harry glanced away uneasily. "Like I said, it was just a dream."

"But it was real!"

"Will you just drop it!" yelled Harry.

"No! Tell me the truth, Potter, are you a Death Eater."

Harry sat stunned for a second before bursting out in laughter.

"Bloody hell, of course not!"

"The are you a... seer or something?"

"No, I'm absolutely rubbish at Divination."

“But-“

“Look, I just..see things sometimes, visions of what Voldemort is doing.”

“You see the things Voldemort does?” asked Malfoy, clearly not believing Harry.

“Not everything. Just sometimes when I sleep.”

“Does he know?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, he’s aware of it.”

“Can he... get inside your mind?”

Harry shook his head. “Not like I can get in his, as far as I know.”

-

“As far as you know!” Malfoy jumped up and began pacing. “You bloody idiot! Don’t you think you could have told me this before I started spending so much time down here with you and teaching you occlumency? What if he can get in your mind? What if he sees me with you, helping you?”

Harry stood up. “Calm down-“

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” roared Malfoy.

“Would you just listen to me!”

“I could be killed, don’t you understand that?!”

“Of course I understand! But there’s no reason for you to worry. I’d know if he’d been in my mind.”

“How. How would you know?”

“For one, because I’m learning Occlumency. I’d be able to sense him. Secondly, I know what it’s like to have him in my mind.”

Malfoy turned angrily to him. “You do, do you? And how exactly would you know that?”

“Because he’s possessed me.”

Malfoy stopped dead in his tracks. “W-What?”

Harry slumped on to the floor with his back against the lounge. “He’s possessed me. Last year, at the Ministry.”

Malfoy sunk to the lounge. “He really possessed you!? Did it hurt?”

“Yeah...” Harry’s eyes glazed over as he remembered the blinding pain he had experienced as Voldemort had inhabited his body. “He wanted Dumbledore to think killing me would kill him.”

“That’s why you really wanted to learn Occlumency, isn’t it?”

“One of the reasons. I do want my book back.” Harry gave a wry grin. “To be quite honest, I’m more worried about Snape’s retribution if he finds out when I take it.”

“How can you say that?”

“Well, I’ve come up against Voldemort five times now, and he still hasn’t managed to do me in. Snape on the other hand...” Harry gave a theatrical shiver. “Now, he’s scary.”

“How can you be so blasé about the fact that the Dark Lord wants you dead?”

“What am I supposed to do? Run about crying all the time? Hide under my bed?”

“Of course not, but a bit of self-preservation would do nicely.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes.



“Are they all like that?”

-

Harry looked up at Malfoy. “The visions?”

Malfoy nodded.

“Pretty much. Mostly just Death Eater meetings, muggle killings and torture. Pretty gruesome stuff,” he muttered.

“But the man in that one... he wasn’t a muggle.”

“No, well, Voldemort treats his Death Eaters pretty shite too. Now you know what you’re up for when you take the Dark Mark.”

“He wouldn’t... not to me.”

Harry snorted. “Don’t be naive. What makes you think he won’t, the second you don’t bow low enough or speak fast enough.”

“My father is one of his most loyal, along with Severus and Bellatrix. My father is the only one of the Dark Lord’s most trusted with a son. I’m to be trained by the Dark Lord himself, when I take the Mark... he’s chosen me.”

“Yeah, well, don’t believe me if it makes you feel better.”

“I don’t.”

“I could tell you all the times I’ve seen the Dark Lord’s most trusted followers bowing and scraping at his feet, grovelling like slaves.”

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. “My father...?” he asked disbelievingly.

“Uhuh. You think you’re going in to some exclusive clique where you’ll have power and position? Well think again. Voldemort intends to subjugate our world, and when you kneel before him you make yourself the first to submit to his cruel intentions.”

"You're wrong. You don't know anything! He's saving our world from the mudbloods and muggles! He's all about pureblood ideals and wizarding power."

"No, he's about personal gain."

"He is doing our world a favour! Every generation, another pureblood family becomes a half-blood family and the pool of pureblood wizards shrinks. The magic blood becomes diluted and eventually, we'll die out. Magic will be lost!"

"Don't be ridiculous. Look at Hermione. She's muggle-born and one of the most powerful witches in this school."

"Sure there are exceptions to the rule, I accept that, but the fact is that the more our society mingles with muggle society, the weaker we will become."

"If you feel that strongly about it, do something about it!"

"I intend to!"

-

"Joining Voldemort is not what I mean! I've told you, all he wants is power, even if he does hide it behind the pursuit of a pureblood society. You're smart, Malfoy. Do something with your life that will help wizarding society, not turn it in to a dictatorship where our lives are controlled."

"We won't be controlled."

"How can you say that? Each time your father is called, he kisses the dirt in front of the Dark Lord and bows his every whim. If you commit yourself to the same life, you are condemning yourself to a life of slavery, no matter which way you look at it. And not only yourself. Your children, and their children will be condemned because of your choices."

“When the Dark Lord wins, my family will have power and wealth! The Dark Lord rewards his followers.”

Harry got up, disgusted. “I’m not going to sit here and try to convince you, Malfoy. But believe me when I say this. The Dark Lord, as you call him, will not win. I will defeat him, and as many of his followers as I can. If you are there when the time comes and we cross paths on the battle field, I won’t hesitate.”

oOo

Whew! I had a big week this week, but I wanted to get this out so I worked on it all weekend. Hope you like it! I COULD NOT think of a decent title for this chapter. Will have the next chappie out by the end of the week.

Quick question... do people think this story is slashy? Cos I don’t, but one reviewer seemed to think so. Let me know pls.

ReViEwErS ! ! !

Kaeim: Thanks, and probably not, to answer your question.

Voldemort is Dead: And as usual, thankyou for the review.

Fhippogriff: Thank you! For the great review. Always good to have this feedback.

Roxoan: Excellent review, thanks. Yeah, Harry doesn’t really feel like apologising either...

Cleofine: Yay! Thank you : )

Vanessa riddle: Glad you liked it : ). I’ll get back to u on some of my favs shortly.

Xurtan: Burn it! No way! Hehe, but he will get it back at some stage. Thanks for reviewing.

Jensindenial3516: Good good good!

Potterdownthestreet: Hehe LOVE your name! Thanks for the review.

Dumbledore's Emerald Phoenix: Thankyou! I love positive reviews. Hope you keep enjoying the story.

Meany: Thanks so much : ) I will try and update asap.

Geovanni Luciano: Hmmm... what can I say? I did state very early on in the story that it wouldn't be slash, and that I'm also not planning on any other pairing with Harry at this point, although if enough people want it I might consider it. Also, Harry is a teenager, of course he's going to act like a child sometimes, although I don't think it's as bad as you make out. Lastly, of course it's convenient that the map got taken away. No point Harry finding anything out so soon, is there? I'm perfectly happy for you discontinue reading the story if you don't like it, but hey, your choice. Thanks for reviewing!

Acting rashly

Harry got up, disgusted. "I'm not going to sit here and try to convince you, Malfoy. But believe me when I say this. The Dark Lord, as you call him, will not win. I will defeat him, and as many of his followers as I can. If you are there when the time comes and we cross paths on the battle field, I won't hesitate."

oOo

Malfoy let out a harsh laugh. "You'll defeat the Dark Lord!? You seem awfully sure of yourself. How exactly are you hoping to accomplish such a feat?"

Harry scowled. "I don't know yet. I just know I will."

"Right. Because some batty old witch made a prophecy and you think it's about you."

Harry froze. "What?"

"Oh, yes. I know all about this prophecy. My father told me what he was doing at the Ministry last year, waiting for you to turn up there and take it for them. And then, just like they planned, along you came and did just that."

Harry snarled in anger. "Well their plan failed spectacularly, didn't it? Half of them were captured by the Order, including your father, and they didn't even succeed in getting the prophecy."

"As I recall, I'm not the only person who lost someone that night, but at least I got my father back!"

Malfoy smirked in victory as Harry's face paled. With an incoherent roar, Harry threw himself at the Slytherin, knocking him to the ground and smashing his fist into the stunned boy's face.

Blindly punching, Harry released all his anger and fury on the boy beneath him.

Within moments, Malfoy began to fight back, struggling to throw Harry off and deflect the blows from Harry's fists.

Harry found himself flipped on his back as Malfoy began to repay the favour. Yelling in fury as blow after blow landed on his face and torso, Harry bucked, making Malfoy lose his balance.

They continued rolling around the floor and hitting each other for a few minutes until they both lost the will to continue fighting.

Harry was exhausted from the exertion of brawling, as well as mentally tired from arguing earlier.

-

Both breathing heavily, they leaned back against the lounge, nursing their respective wounds. "You pack one hell of a punch for such a scrawny guy," groaned Malfoy after a few long minutes of silence.

Harry massaged swollen knuckles with his other swollen hand. "I am not scrawny."

"Muggle duelling is positively Neanderthal. It's so primitive, and utterly ridiculous."

Harry shrugged weakly. "Effective, though."

Malfoy sighed. "This is ridiculous."

Harry frowned and rolled his head to look at him. "What is?"

"This." Malfoy gestured half-heartedly with his hands in front of him. "Us fighting again about You-Know-Who and joining the Death Eaters and all that rot."

"It is kind of an important issue. We can't just pretend it doesn't exist," replied Harry a little hotly.

"Look, all I'm saying is we agreed not to talk about it and we keep ending up arguing about it. I know what you think and you know what

I want, so let's just forget about it and not talk about it anymore. I don't think either of us is going to change our minds any time soon."

"I just don't understand how you can be so... I don't know... like you are. I can't understand why you believe the things you do."

"Well if you want to spend all our time fighting, go ahead and bring it up again. I, on the other hand, would rather spend my time doing productive things, and I thought you brought me down here for company, not to argue with when you felt the need to let off steam."

Harry sighed defeatedly. "Look, I just need to think for a while, alright?"

Malfoy huffed. "Whatever. Walk away, then."

Harry ignored Malfoy and got to his feet. He took the stairs up out of the library and once in the tunnel past the Basilisk Chamber, he used the Pendant to apparate into a passageway near the infirmary.

...

After being tended to by Madam Pomfrey, who had tisked and tutted over his injuries, Harry was walking to Gryffindor Tower when he heard his name called behind him.

"Potter!"

Harry turned in surprise. "Ron?"

Ron was storming towards him, an ugly look on his freckled face. "Where were you this weekend?" the redhead asked, sneering at Harry's battered appearance and not seeming to care.

"Around. Why?" replied Harry, his voice turning cold at the other boy's tone.

-

"Why?! Because you missed practice again."

Harry bit his lip. He had completely forgotten about Quidditch the last few weeks. "Look, I'm sorry alright? I-"

Ron cut him off. "Um... no. It isn't alright. I'm the one holding this team together when it should be you. I'm calling the plays, I'm organising the training! You're the captain of this team, and if you want to keep it that way, you'd better start turning up to practice and doing your job."

"I will! I've just been preoccupied, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to miss practice."

"Yeah, well be preoccupied on your own time, not the team's."

With that, Ron turned and strode away. It wasn't nice to be on the receiving end of Ron's temper.

Harry had to admit Ron was right, though. This month's match was between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, and he couldn't keep skipping practices.

oOo

Harry had an Occlumency lesson with Snape after dinner on Wednesday. He had slept well the night before, with no visions, so he was confident that he would perform quite well today. Between Snape's lesson, practice with Malfoy and clearing his mind every night, he could see the improvement quite clearly.

Knocking on the door, he heard Snape call "Enter!" He attempted to go in, only to find that the door was locked.

"Er... Professor?" he called. "Could you open the door please sir?"

"Do it yourself, Potter. You've demonstrated that you're capable."

Frowning slightly, Harry hissed open and pushed on the door. Immediately and to his great surprise, Harry was thrown back against



the opposite wall of the dungeon corridor and the door slammed shut loudly, a bright blue light flashing around the edge of the door.

Harry groaned and got to his feet. "What the hell was that?"

"That, Mr Potter," came Snape's voice from the now open door, "Was my new wards, designed specifically to keep you out. Quite effective, wouldn't you say?"

Harry scowled. "You could have warned me."

Snape smirked. "Where would be the fun in that? Come in."

They began with ten minutes of clearing the mind. Near the end, Harry slowly began creating the impenetrable darkness in his mind, remembering the familiarity and sense of comfort his cupboard had provided. Clearing his mind and erecting his barriers gave him a very detached feeling, yet a greater awareness of his mind and body. Harry could see how Snape was always so stoic, rarely letting others see his emotions.

-

"Now, Snape began, as Harry slowly opened his eyes and focussed on his professor. "We will begin as usual. I believe you have become reasonably accomplished at protecting your memories, at least for the first few attempts on your mind. Tonight I will not be quite so aggressive, and instead of focussing on hiding your memories, I want you to concentrate more on actually expelling me from your mind."

Harry had indeed become quite good at keeping both Malfoy and Snape from his memories, but had only succeed in banishing Malfoy's presence altogether.

"Legilimens," intoned Snape. Harry could immediately tell the difference from previous weeks. Snape merely let himself fall endlessly through the darkness, not attempting to access Harry's thoughts, just falling and waiting for Harry to throw him out.

Harry sensed Snape's presence, but the darkness prevented Harry from actually seeing him. Focussing on the foreign being, he wondered how he was actually supposed to do this. Snape had never really explained the actual process.

He must have let his barriers drop a little, because Snape sensed his confusion and pulled out.

"A pathetic attempt, Potter."

Harry scowled. "Maybe I'd have better luck if you actually gave me some instruction instead of expecting me to just do it."

"Manners, Potter." Snape leaned backwards against his desk. "There are several ways in which you may banish a Legilimens from your mind. The first is to use some sort of spell in your mind, perhaps imagine you are duelling them. Of course, this will only work provided you are a better duellist and you win. Even then, there is the possibility that the Legilimens will be strong enough to remain in your mind."

Snape adjusted his position before continuing. "Another method is to imagine that the Legilimens is simply not there, try to create the feeling in your mind that he is gone; your mind is empty of all but your thoughts. If your will is strong enough, it will become so."

Snape sneered slightly at this suggestion, as though he didn't really believe Harry could be so strong willed.

"Yet another option is to imagine physically of otherwise pushing the Legilimens from some physical space. Perhaps you magically banish them, not in a duel, but with a simple blasting hex or banishing charm. Similarly, killing the person in your mind will erase their presence."

Harry nearly smiled at the thought of murdering the Potions professor and getting away with it because he wasn't really dead. Snape seemed to sense this and his sneer became more pronounced.

"Again. Legilimens."

Harry picked the second option Snape had mentioned and tried to imagine how it would feel without Snape there, if his mind was empty of all but the darkness. This went on for about thirty minutes with no success from Harry before Snape finally withdrew.

-

"That will be enough for tonight. You did not tire so easily tonight," observed Snape.

"I've slept well lately."

"I see... if you experience effects such as the ones you did the other week, you will come and see me."

"Yes sir." Harry was surprised at that, but he supposed that Snape was the one who created most of the infirmary's potions, but the Post-Cruciatius potion wasn't really one typically found there.

"I want you at all times of the day to be concentrating on keeping your barriers up. A good Legilimens will attack when you least suspect it, when your mind is elsewhere, or focussed on something. If your barriers are not erected when you are in such a state, the Legilimens will enter your mind, browse your thoughts and remove himself, perhaps without your noticing. If you do notice, it may be too late to guard your thoughts."

"But it takes so much effort. I can't think properly if I'm only concentrating on the barriers."

"Hence the need for practice, Mr. Potter. I do not expect you to be able to do it immediately. I simply want for you to erect your barriers every time you are reminded to do so. Eventually, it will become second nature to do so."

Harry nodded at the logic. "Yes sir."

"Good. Your next lesson will be on Saturday night at the usual time. Do not be late."

“Yes sir.”

Harry left the dungeon, erecting his barrier of darkness as he made his way through the halls to Gryffindor Tower.

He spent the rest of the evening working with Pandora on their Herbology Essay. It wasn't due until the next Monday, but he wanted to get it over with. At midnight, he heaved a yawn and got up to go to bed. Standing and stretching, he looked down at Pandora.

“Night, Pandora.”

“Night Harry! I'll see you tomorrow.” She gave a bright smile, not appearing tired at all despite the late hour.

Giving a tired smile, he turned and slumped up the stairs to the dorms, where he fell into bed fully dressed.

oOo

On Thursday afternoon, Harry dutifully attended Quidditch practice, relishing the feeling of flying again. It wasn't the best practice he had ever attended. Ron was practically ignoring him unless he gave him a direct instruction, and Ginny had of course sided with Ron, personally offended at what Harry had said about her family.

-

Garrison Elwood was openly hostile. He was a muggleborn and insulted that a fellow Gryffindor had talked to a supposed friend in the manner Harry had. The rest of the team seemed to be silently supporting Ron, following the boy's lead of talking to Harry only when he spoke to them.

Sighing sadly, he chose to ignore them and focus on the joy of flying, searching out the tiny golden snitch as the rest of the team practiced their respective plays.

oOo

As he was leaving breakfast on Friday, Harry over heard a short and whispered conversation between Snape and Dumbledore. Halting and standing silently around the corner, he strained to hear. "I have something to discuss, Albus. Perhaps following dinner tonight?"

"Of course. My office will be acceptable to you?"

Snape must have nodded, because Dumbledore spoke again. "Very well. Until then, enjoy your day, Severus."

Harry jerked back as Snape suddenly swept around the corner, a sneer on his face.

He scowled when he saw Harry. "Eavesdropping, Potter?" he asked in a dangerous voice.

"No sir! Just on my way to get my things for Defence."

Snape narrowed his eyes, clearly suspicious. "Do not be late." He swept off, his robes billowing behind him.

...

Defence was the first time Harry had actually spoken to Malfoy all week, despite being partnered in Potions. In that class, they could get away with ignoring each other, but in this class to do that would mean they would probably lose. Harry was still put out by his argument with the Slytherin, and was pretty sure the other boy felt the same way.

Despite that, they managed to do well, maintaining their record as the only team not yet defeated.

oOo

Skiping dinner that night and escaping from Pandora, who was still the only person talking to him, Harry went straight to the Chamber and up to the waterfall painting.

He stepped quickly through the cold water, still not used to the icy water drenching him.

Inside the waterfall, he sidled to the left, but paused. He had always gone to the left side, never the right. To what part of the castle would the right side take him?

Moving back the other way he stepped for the first time through the right cave wall, finding himself in a painting he had never seen before. It was a foggy setting inside the painting, and Harry could see dark shapes lurking in the fog. The canvas showed him nothing; looking out, he saw only pitch black. Shivering, he hurried through the fog, coming to the magical barrier quite quickly. He went through about ten paintings until he came to one he could see out of.

-

He was definitely still in the dungeons, if the damp, dark, stone walls were any indication. It was nearly impossible to see into the corridor.

Stepping into the next painting gave him a shock. The painting was dark, and Harry found himself immersed in icy cold water. The shock caused him to inhale water and he struggled not to cough and breathe in more. Swimming frantically, he hoped the surface was not far away.

His chest was getting tight and he was feeling dizzy, the need to cough overwhelming when he felt not air, but the magical barrier that separated paintings.

A second later, his head erupted through a patch of grassy soil. He spat out a mouthful of water, coughing violently as he pulled his feet out of water and onto solid ground. Looking into the hole he had just come out of, he saw that it was barely fifteen centimetres deep, and there certainly wasn't any water down there.

Still spluttering, he got to his feet only to trip over something as he took a step forward. Looking back, he started and jumped to his feet.

A tiny witch sat in the grass, her long brightly striped socks sticking out from beneath her grass green robes. She wore bright red high heeled shoes. Over all, the outfit clashed horribly.

What caught Harry's eye however, was the bright blue hair which was plaited down both sides of her face, shorter strands of hair wisping around her face.

"Er... hello," said Harry.

The witch smiled widely and jumped up, grabbing his hand. "I'm Wendy! What's your name?" she gabbled excitedly.

"Ahh... Harry."

"Harry!" she squealed. "What a wonderful name! I simply adore it!"

Beginning to think that this might be a witch to stay away from, Harry worked his hand free and stepped back.

"Well er... it was nice to meet you, but I really have to go now..."

The witch looked dismayed. "Won't you stay for tea?" She gestured to a small white tea table with three chairs around it, and Harry couldn't help but notice that there seemed to be a teddy bear sitting in one chair and a stuffed sack with a coconut head in the other. "You're all wet! You could sit in the sun with me and dry off!"

She grabbed his hand again and dragged him over to the table, pushing him into the only empty chair. Grabbing a pretty little teapot, she held it over a china cup, and Harry nearly expected that nothing would come out. To his surprise, something did, but it wasn't tea.

"Er... Wendy? What is this?"

-

"Why it's red cordial, of course! My favourite!" she replied, unceremoniously pushing the sack-coconut-head to the ground and assuming its seat.

Harry smothered a laugh as she poured two more cups of cordial. Not wanting to be impolite, he took a sip of the sweet beverage. It had

been years since he had tasted cordial, and he wondered how the muggle drink had been painted into this painting. Perhaps the artist had been a muggle?

“Teddy loves it too, but I’m afraid it makes him a bit of a chatterbox!” She giggled spiritedly and Harry couldn’t help but smile.

...

After finishing three cups of cordial, Harry thought it time to move on.

“Do you know of a way for me to get around easier? It’s just that with some of those landscapes it takes me ages to get anywhere.”

The witch giggled. “You’re new, aren’t you, dear?” She patted his arm almost sympathetically. “Don’t worry, you’ll get the hang of it. All you have to know is what painting you want to get to, have a firm picture fixed in your mind.” She giggled and tapped a finger to the side of her head.

“So, say I want to get to the highest tower, I have to actually walk there first?”

She nodded emphatically. “Exactly, you got it! Although, if someone else takes you then you don’t have to memorise lots of different paintings.”

After a few more minutes of chatter, he thanked Wendy and left the painting, deciding to explore a bit more before heading to Dumbledore’s office. As he stepped through into the next painting, he vaguely noticed that Teddy’s china cup of cordial was nearly empty.

...

Making his way through a dozen more paintings, Harry grinned when he suddenly found himself in a familiar room. It was the Slytherin Common Room. He knew he had been in the corridor opposite the dungeon room before, and he had never wondered how to get across it. He supposed if he continued heading this way, he would eventually meet up with paintings he had been in before.



Continuing on, he passed through what must have been several Slytherin dorms before coming into a different room.

The room was shaped like a quarter circle, and light shone through what Harry supposed must be a window, for he couldn't see it. Harry supposed that on the other side of the wall was the staircase leading down the tower, as there was a plain wooden door at the far side. A bed sat along the straight wall and a desk that followed the curve of the tower sat opposite it.

A door with a painting hanging on it sat on another door opposite him.

The room was distinctly Slytherin, which puzzled Harry slightly. The bedspread was emerald green trimmed with silver and a Slytherin tie hung over a chair. The plush carpet of the room was a green so dark it was almost black, and a green Quidditch scarf hung on a hook next to a poster of the -

Chudley Cannons. Harry smirked, wondering what Ron would say if he knew he had something in common with a Slytherin.

The reason he was confused was that it couldn't possibly be Snape's room, as Harry had been there. It was clearly a student's room, given the decoration and homework lying on the desk. Yet Harry hadn't thought students were allowed to room alone, and he had already passed through the Slytherin dorms.

Wanting to see the room from another point of view, Harry stepped into the next painting. It was as he had thought, and he had come into the one on the opposite door. Across from him just next to the first painting was a big window, opened wide, and below the painting was a small fireplace, currently extinguished.

The window provided a magnificent view of Hogwarts grounds, including the Quidditch Pitch. Harry turned to look at the painting he was in. It was an elegant room, and Harry supposed it was a portrait, but the occupant was currently elsewhere. Harry walked over and sat in a plush armchair.

It was extremely comfortable, and Harry soon found himself dozing.

He was raised from the doze at the sound of a door closing, and he sat up in the chair, looking through the canvas into the room. Harry's jaw dropped open. It was Malfoy.

He watched silently as Malfoy deposited his bag onto the bed, then turned to the desk, promptly tripping over the corner of his trunk. "Shite!" hissed Malfoy, ripping off his boot and inspecting his foot.

Harry attempted to stifle his laugh, but failed, and Malfoy's head shot up at the sound. Harry dove from the arm chair, getting as low as he could, but he was too late.

"Potter!" roared Malfoy. "Get up where I can see you now, I know that was you!"

Malfoy sounded livid, and Harry cringed as he poked his head over the frame, a timid but, (he hoped) infuriating grin on his face. "Hey, Malfoy. Nice place you've got here." Harry waved his hand lazily in the general direction of the room.

Malfoy practically growled. "And what the hell are you doing here?"

"I was exploring."

Malfoy sneered. "I can't believe you're back in there! Go explore somewhere other than my personal space."

"Why do you get a room all to yourself anyway!?"

"Because I'm Head Boy, Potter. Now get the hell out of my bedroom!"

Harry held up his hand mockingly. "Hey, no need to get huffy. I didn't even know it was your room until you came in."

"Yeah well now that you've satisfied your curiosity, feel free to leave."

-

“On my way.”

“Good. Don’t come back. I don’t like being spied on.”

“I wasn’t spying,” retorted Harry as he stalked from the painting, fixing the image of the landscape in Dumbledore’s office in his mind.

This time when he walked through the barrier, he didn’t appear in the next painting, but in his desired destination. ‘Well that was much easier than walking through a thousand paintings to get here,’ he thought to himself.

He peered out the frame, but the office was empty. Chewing thoughtfully on his bottom lip, he decided to sit and wait.

He pushed his sleeve up to look at his watch and saw that it was just after dinner. That meant that hopefully, Dumbledore would be meeting with Snape very shortly.

He didn’t have to wait very long before Dumbledore entered the office followed by Snape and then McGonagall.

...

Once they were all seated Dumbledore (after offering both professors a lemon drop) spoke. “I believe you had something you wished to discuss, Severus?”

“Yes. The Dark Lord grows ever more suspicious that there is a traitor in his circle. I fear for the integrity of certain plans he has informed me of. I believe he is giving groups of Death Eaters select information in an effort to find the spy.”

“Severus, you must be careful...”

“I am aware of that, Minerva,” snapped Snape. The Potions Master pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Forgive me Minerva. My busy schedule is taking its toll on my temper.”

Harry would have snorted, if he wasn’t at a risk of being heard.

“Severus, what news have you for me?”

Snape leaned closer, lowering his voice. “I have arranged a meeting with an associate of mine. I believe he will provide us with an adequate alternative.”

“That is excellent news,” replied Dumbledore, but his voice was grave. “Will there be a need to find a substitute for your classes at all.”

“No, I shall be meeting with the target this Sunday night, in Hogsmeade.”

“Aberforth will look forward to your visit.”

Snape smiled grimly. “Alas, he shall not see me. I believe it would be wise to assume a disguise. Given the nature of the meeting, I do not want to risk being seen by another of his followers who may run back to him with tales of treacherous conspirators.”

-

Dumbledore nodded agreement. “Very well, you will of course let me know how your plan progresses?”

Snape nodded assent. “Of course.”

McGonagall placed a sympathetic hand on Snape’s shoulder as she stood. “Well, I must be going. Essays to mark.”

Snape stood as well. “As do I. I shall escort you.”

Both professors bade goodbye to the headmaster, who made his way up to what Harry assumed was the entrance to his private chambers.

Disappointed with the shortness of the meeting, but not so much so with the content, Harry made his way to Gryffindor Tower, a plan formulating in his mind. Snape was meeting someone in Hogsmeade this Sunday, and Harry was going to be there.

oOo

Lifting up the trapdoor a few centimetres, he peeked out to make sure the cellar was empty. Satisfied that no one was there, he clambered out of the tunnel and into the basement that was dusty and filled with boxes of unpacked sweets.

Throwing his cloak over himself, he walked over to the stairs and up into the main shop. There were a few people in there, but not too many that he wasn't able to move freely around. He dropped a few knuts and sickles on the counter and took a few lolly pops and jelly beans from a jar.

Waiting until another customer left, he swiftly exited after them and walked into the middle of the wide street.

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows on the people walking up and down the street, but there was no shadow following Harry. He made his way to the end of Hogsmeade's main street where the Hog's Head was located.

He slipped in to the quiet pub where a few patrons were sitting alone, sipping alcohol from dirty glasses.

Wondering how he would spot Snape if he was wearing a disguise, Harry settled down on an empty stool where he had a good view of the door. He was satisfied that either Snape or whoever he was meeting was not here yet, as there were no pairs in the dingy pub.

Wishing he had something to sip on, he waited impatiently for someone to enter through the door, which was rattling with the wind outside.

He was surprised however, when a door opened at the side of the bar and a man stepped through, his eyes alert as they took in the room. He was completely unfamiliar to Harry, but he watched the man as he walked closer.

Stopping a metre from Harry, the man ordered a firewhisky, his voice low and gravelly. He had brown hair flecked with gray and was wearing loose fitting, navy robes, and a light cloak.

-

The barkeeper supplied him with a drink and Harry eyed the man critically as he took a small sip. Harry felt a thrill of recognition at what happened next. The man spun, his cloak flaring out around him, and his robes billowed as he strode confidently over to a table in the corner of the pub and took a chair across from a cowed figure who sat hunched at a wooden table.

Harry was sure that the first man must be Snape, and he slid off his stool, moving slowly closer to table. He had to move slowly as the floorboards were old and more than once he winced as one creaked loudly beneath his feet as he impatiently made his way closer.

He was halfway there when he noticed something odd. The other patrons in the bar were no longer drinking; several were standing and drifting closer to where Snape sat with his back to the room.

Harry felt dread as he recognised one of them. He didn't know his name, and couldn't recall where he had seen the man, but he knew it was not at school.

Harry glanced desperately back at Snape who was conversing in low tones with the cowed figure, and as Harry watched the second man slid his hand into his robe.

Harry pulled out his wand, grasping it tightly as he realised; this was some kind of trap, and Snape was about to be caught!

Gritting his teeth, he was about to make a move when the cowed man suddenly slumped forward onto the table. At the same time, Snape stood, diving to the side and twisting to shoot off a curse at one of the men behind him.

Harry had no idea how Snape had known something was up, but the odds weren't in his favour and Harry couldn't just stand there.

Aiming at one of the men, who he assumed must be Death Eaters, he cast a stupefy. The men were not expecting an attack from the side and the man dropped with no trouble.

Quickly dodging a spell sent in his general direction, he darted to the other side of the room, realising too late that the dusty floor revealed the footprints he left.

Seeing that Snape (he desperately hoped it was Snape) was practically through the door he had entered through, Harry decided to take the chance that he would make it, and dove towards the entrance door.

As he did so, one of the nearest men had darted forward, snatching frantically at the air in a bid to grab the invisible person.

He missed, but his boot stepped heavily on the corner of the cloak and it was dragged off of Harry as he went through the door.

He grabbed at it, but the Death Eaters now had a clear target and he only just managed to avoid their curses as he ran from the pub.

He was fifteen metres away when the door burst open behind him and he heard a loud shout.

“Potter! It’s Potter, don’t let him get away!”

-

Harry turned and bolted. He would duel if he had to, but at the moment he thought it would be a better idea to try and get away without a fight. After all, if he got involved in a duel, people were bound to notice and he would be in serious trouble for leaving the castle so soon after Dumbledore told him quite clearly not to.

He could hear footsteps pounding behind him, and knew he couldn’t outrun them forever. Nor could he hope to hide in the wide street.

Zig-zagging a little in the hope that any curses they sent would miss him, he saw a few others detach themselves from where they were leaning against the walls of buildings ahead of him.

Seeing a side street, he turned abruptly and darted down it. It was short, and came out in a small street. Not bothering to consciously pick a direction, he put on a spurt of speed and turned left. He turned down the next side street he saw, hoping that he could lose the men chasing him. His breathing was becoming laboured, and he tripped on a rusted bucket that was lying on its side in the dirt.

He was sent sprawling, and he felt a sharp sting in his knees and palms, the impact jarring his wrists.

Jumping up, he glanced back and saw a smaller number of Death Eaters just turning into his alley. They must have split up to go different ways.

He began sprinting again, having lost ground.

Spells hit the ground around him, and one finally found its mark. A sharp sting in the middle of his back made him gasp in pain.

Another alleyway appeared and he ducked down it, looking back and flinging off a curse.

Not waiting to see if it hit anyone, he kept going and his heart sunk as he realised the alleyway was a dead end. He stopped near the end when he heard the Death Eaters turn into the alley, and the thought flashed through his mind that he couldn't believe how rash and foolish this escapade had been. It had gone horribly wrong, and he was now trapped in a dead-end alley way with onetwothreefourfive-six! Death Eaters closing in on him.

"Give up Potter. There's no way you can win this."

From the hulking figure and deep, raspy voice Harry recognised Macnair. He backed away slowly trying to formulate a plan of escape.



Harry held his wand straight out in front of him, pointed at Macnair. His eyes darted between the other five Death Eaters and back to Macnair. He needed to keep track of them all, but wasn't willing to give Macnair, who seemed to be the ringleader, the chance to curse him.

Taking another step back, he saw the black cloaked figures closing in as his heel hit the brick wall of the alley. He made a decision. If he was going to go down, he would go down fighting.

Making a silent count to three, he flung himself to the ground, rolling sideways as he cast a spell at Macnair. "Stupefy!"

-

The second he moved, five curses were sent his way. His roll had taken him away from the spells and they hit the wall behind him. Unfortunately, Macnair had also avoided the Harry's spell.

Rolling to his feet he shot off another stupefy, and this one found its mark. One Death Eater fell to the ground but as he swung around to cast the spell again, a bright shot of light hit him square in the chest.

He was flung backwards and his wand was ripped from his hand, sailing through the air into Macnair's waiting hand.

Harry scuttled backwards, but was stopped by a foot in his back. He made to stand up, but that same foot stamped down on his hand, grinding it painfully into the ground. A sharp stone dug in to the tender flesh of his palm as the heavy boot twisted down, and he gave an angry yell of pain.

A hand grasped a handful of his hair and jerked his head up. Harry grit his teeth as Macnair stepped closer until he was his nose was inches from Harry's own.

"Not good enough Potter. Looks like we got the better of you this time." Harry cringed as the man's foul breath wafted over his face.

“Feel good to beat someone a third your age with six to one odds? Good for you!” spat Harry savagely.

The hand on his head tightened its hold and Macnair curled a hand around Harry’s neck, squeezing so that Harry struggled for breath. Macnair pushed his wand to Harry’s forehead.

“Brave Potter, very brave,” he hissed as he drew back and levelled his wand at Harry’s head.”But we’ll see if you’re still so bold when you’re facing the wrath of the Dark Lord... stupefy!”

oOo

Hey guys, my update rate has gotten a bit slower since I started back at uni (sorry!), but hopefully it’s not too bad. Again I couldn’t think of a decent title for this chap. I’ve already written a bit of the next chappie, so it will hopefully be up a bit sooner.

Please let me know what you think by reviewing : )

oOo

REviEweRS!

Thanks as always to my fantastic reviewers:

KWGTEB: Hi! Thanks so much for reviewing : ) I hope you keep liking the story.

Jensindenial3516: no worries : )

Vanessa riddle: hi! I PROMISE to get you a list of some of my favs really soon. Sorry I didn’t already! Yeah, I kinda forgot about Ginny – I guess she is just ‘chilling with her friends.’

-

Harry1234: Hey! Thanks for taking the time to review. Hopefully my update rate will not get too sloooow. Next update will be soon. (promise)

Curious-Reader: Two reviews, thanks! Glad you've been enjoying it. A blurb in my bio about the story is a good idea – I'll get one up sometime soon.

Fhippogriff: A great review, as always, thankyou : ) Good to hear the story isn't predictable (that would make it kinda boring)

"Brave Potter, very brave," he hissed as he drew back and levelled his wand at Harry's head. "But we'll see if you're still so bold when you're facing the wrath of the Dark Lord... stupefy!"

Harry held his breath as Macnair spoke the spell, but before he finished the word, a burst of red light hit another Death Eater from the side, who fell into Macnair, knocking him down and causing the spell to go awry.

The hand on Harry's head let go as yells came from the congregated Death Eaters. Harry scrambled from the ground and was immediately restrained by two Death Eaters. Looking desperately up the alleyway, he could see no one, but another burst of red light suddenly emitted from thin air, halfway down the alley.

At Macnair's orders, the Death Eaters began flinging spells at random locations down the alleyway, hoping to hit whoever was attacking them.

One of the Death Eaters holding Harry dropped, and he used the advantage to spin and knee the one on his other side in a particularly painful spot. The man howled and dropped to his knees, and Harry yanked a wand from his hand.

"You traitorous bastard!"

Harry spun at the call, hearing another thud as another man dropped. A hand grasped his robes and he turned back, stupefying the one whose wand he had taken.

There were now only two Death Eaters left standing, both flinging spells at a dark figure. No longer invisible, Snape was dodging and blocking curses and sending his own, duelling masterfully.

Harry picked a target and stupefied one of the remaining Death Eaters, just as Snape took out the other.

Harry hurried to Macnair and fumbled around in the man's robes, finding his wand in a deep pocket. He stood up, and came face to face with the livid face of Professor Snape.

The Potions Master was breathing heavily, his nostrils flared and a look of rage in his eyes. "Potter," he growled, his voice deadly. "You have no idea how angry I am! This," he gestured at the fallen Death Eaters, "is exactly the reason you are not supposed to leave the castle."

Harry cast about for some excuse. "I-"

"Believe me, Potter, you will explain this, but here is neither the time nor the place and I do not think you could possibly have a remotely suitable excuse for your actions."

-

On the ground, one of the Death Eaters that Harry had stunned stirred.

"Go Potter, go now. I shall deal with this."

Snape held out Harry's invisibility cloak.

Taking one last look at the unconscious Death Eaters, Harry took the proffered cloak and threw it around himself as Snape cast a patronus. The silvery spell erupted from Snape's wand and disappeared down the alleyway.

Following the direction it had taken, he made his way quickly to Honeydukes and through the tunnel to Hogwarts. He knew he was in trouble, and for one of the first times this year felt that he really deserved it. He had been an idiot to try and spy on Snape, and an even bigger idiot to get involved in the fight.

Thinking back, he realised Snape may have been led into a trap, but he had been in control of the situation.

The look of rage on Snape's face had actually scared him, and he feared to think what the repercussions for his actions this time would be.

He made it to the base of the statue of the one eyed witch and crawled up into the corridor.

He wasn't entirely sure where he should go; Snape had merely told him to go. Deciding not to enrage the Potions Master further, he hurried to the man's office. Remembering the new wards, he settled for hanging in the corridor, pulling his cloak around him in the chilly air.

After forty minutes of waiting and wondering, Harry finally turned to see Snape bearing down on him, his face absolutely livid. The look hardened further when Snape caught sight of Harry.

"Potter," growled Snape, speeding up. Grasping Harry tightly by the back of his cloak, Snape flung open his office door with unnecessary force and propelled Harry through. He stumbled slightly, but caught himself, only to be pushed forcefully into a seat by the irate Potions Master. "Sit and do not speak," hissed Snape.

Striding to the fireplace, Snape grabbed a pinch of floo powder and threw it into the grate. A second later, the fire turned green and Snape stuck his head in, conversing for a few moments before pulling his head out.

Snape sat stiffly in his chair. "The headmaster is on his way. When he gets here you will explain yourself. Until then I do not want to hear you even breathe."

Snape pulled a pile of homework assignments towards him and began marking, and Harry was sure the sharp jabs of his quill were putting holes in the parchment. After only a minute however, Snape gave a growl and threw the quill down, pushing the work back to where it had been earlier.

They sat in silence, the air thick with tension and Snape kept shooting glares at Harry.

Ten minutes later Dumbledore arrived, a severe look on his usually cheerful face.

-

Snape stood. "Albus, this boy," here he pointed at Harry, "is absolutely insufferable. Not only did he endanger himself, but he endangered me, as well. I will not have my life put in jeopardy because he cannot follow rules which are set forth for. His. Protection."

At some point, Snape had turned to face Harry, and was now leaning inches from Harry's face, even though Harry was leaning back in his chair as far as he could. Snape's voice was strangled, he was trying not to yell but barely succeeding.

"Not only did you leave the school, as you were specifically ordered not to, you saw fit to engage in activities involving those we are specifically trying to keep you from."

"I-"

"No!" Snape cut him off. "You will speak when I tell you to and not before." Snape paused for breath. "Your longing to satisfy your curiosity of things which are not your business is likely what got you into this situation, and it will get you killed if you don't start listening to those more knowledgeable than yourself."

"I would listen if people told me anything!" replied Harry, his voice raised. "But all people ever tell me is to be a good boy and not worry!"

Snape slammed a hand down on the wooden desk. "Shut up!" He was breathing heavily now, and Harry could see a tic going in his face.

Dumbledore took over. "Perhaps you might tell us how you came to be in the Hog's Head today. How did you know Professor Snape would be there?"

Harry had come up with a viable excuse earlier. "I didn't know Snape would be there. I didn't even know it was him."

"And yet you jumped to defend me when that fight broke out."

"Well you seemed to be the underdog and I recognised one of those Death Eaters."

"I was completely in control of the situation! I would have been back at Hogwarts in no time, had I not needed to go after you."

Dumbledore cleared his throat and the argument stopped. "Harry, you were given the chance to abide by the rules set forth. These rules are no different to any other student. This was your last chance. I'm afraid what you did today was extremely serious, and you will be punished accordingly. Professor Snape will decide the punishment, as he was the one whose life you endangered today."

"I think one hundred points from his house ought to make him rethink his actions, and of course a week of detentions." Snape looked at Harry. "Though if you ask me Mr. Potter, you deserve far more than that."

"I quite agree, Severus. Detentions and points don't seem to be having much of an effect on Harry's behaviour." Dumbledore fixed Harry with a stern stare. "I would like you please to hand over your invisibility cloak, Harry."

-

Harry blinked blankly, clutching the cloak to him. There was no way in hell Dumbledore was getting his most treasured possession.

To Harry's surprise, Snape pulled Dumbledore to the side, and though Snape lowered his voice considerably, Harry could still hear what he said. "Headmaster, are you sure that is the best course of action. I admit it would curtail his little adventures, but it is useful should he get into any trouble."



Dumbledore replied, not bothering to lower his voice. "That may be so, Severus, but he should not be in any danger if he remains in the castle."

"Experience would say otherwise, Albus." Harry couldn't help but heartedly agree with Snape.

"You know as well as I that there are extra precautions in place this year. There is no chance Harry will be harmed within the castle's walls."

Snape pursed his lips but said nothing and Dumbledore turned to Harry, extending his hand. "Your cloak please, Harry."

Harry looked desperately at Snape, but the man merely raised a condescending brow.

"No... you can't take my cloak."

"He can and he will, Mr. Potter. Now hand it over."

"No!" Harry stood abruptly, the chair banging to the floor behind him. "You already took my book and my Map. This is all I have left that was my Dad's. I'm not letting you take it!"

Dumbledore looked at Harry sadly. "I will not keep it forever, just until I am satisfied that your behaviour has returned to normal."

Harry took a step back from Dumbledore's outstretched hand. "I said no."

"Potter, stop being ridiculous!" snapped Snape, withdrawing his wand.

Harry narrowed his eyes at the Potions Master. He didn't think Snape would curse him, although he was extremely angry at the moment.

Dumbledore took a step closer and tried to take the cloak but Harry yanked it away. Doing the only thing he could think of, Harry turned and slammed open the door, running into the corridor. He heard Snape yelling behind him, but didn't stop. He fumbled in his robes as

he ran and as soon as he had rounded a corner he used the Pendant to take him to the chamber.

He stormed angrily over to lounge and flung himself down, holding the invisibility cloak tightly. He felt tears sting the back of his eyes as he thought about how he would feel if Dumbledore took the cloak. It was one of his only links to his parents, and he wasn't going to be parted from it willingly.

Salz stuck her head out at Harry where she was curled on the dead branch. "What'sss wrong, Harryyy?"

"Salzzzz." Harry turned to face the snake, who had grown considerably since he had found him in the Garden at Privet Drive. He was now nearly a metre long, and much of his scarlet colouring had -

faded, though there was still a little around the head, and he was mostly green and silver with some black markings. "I don't know what to do. People keep treating me like a child, and I'm not. They tried to take my Dad'sss cloak away from me."

"Tried?"

"I ssstill have it. I pretty much ran away." Harry gave a low chuckle. "I don't think they were exxxpecting it."

"Very sssneaky Harryyy."

Harry gave another chuckle. Sneaky wasn't really the word he would have used, but if Salz liked it, he didn't mind.

oOo

Harry slept in the chamber that night, but went to the Great Hall for breakfast on Monday morning. He was starving and ate two full plates of food before he was cut short by the bell for class.

First up was defence, and Harry was silently dreading facing Snape. He walked there with Pandora. "So Harry, I didn't see you much this weekend. I was hoping we could hang out a bit."

"Sorry Pandora, I had a lot of things to do. Maybe tonight we could just talk or something instead of doing homework."

Pandora grinned. "Sounds good to me!"

Harry was tense all through Defence, but Snape ignored him and lectured the entire lesson about Ineri. They were starting a unit on Dark Creatures, and would be learning about things like Ineri, werewolves, vampires and Baknaroks.

...

He was sitting across from Pandora in charms as she wriggled her nose, trying to get the spell right. The action was quite cute, but it made Harry frown. There was something about it...

Pandora looked up to catch Harry staring at her. "Sorry Harry, I should give you a go."

Harry stood up to have a go.

"I really should know this spell, I've done it before. I just can't seem to get the hang of it." She gave a little giggle and waved her wand again, incanting "Sprillius!"

It was supposed to make the flower in the pot in front of them perk up a bit, but theirs was still drooped over.

Harry concentrated on the plant. He had had a few goes before, but the flower had only twitched. Now, he looked at the spell a different way. He knew cheering charms, and this was sort of the same thing, only for plants. He knew that plants were less complex than people, so he should find this quite easy, given that he was competent with cheering charms.

-

He brandished his wand and focussed on the correct wand movement; a swish and point movement. "Sprillius!"

Immediately, the flower began to turn its face upwards into the sun that was shining through the window. He smiled at his achievement.

"Oh, good job Mr Potter!" cried Flitwick's shrill voice.

Pandora gave him a friendly punch to the shoulder, and Harry was glad that Salz was curled around the other one. "Yeah, nice one Harry. That didn't take you long!"

...

That night, Harry attended his first detention after the Hogsmeade incident. Snape set him to writing lines, and proceeded to ignore him for the next three hours. By the time Snape released him with a sneer and a wave at the door, Harry's hand was cramped and sore.

For the first time, he actually wasn't angry at Snape, but felt a little guilty instead. Snape seemed to have taken Harry's actions personally, and Harry couldn't help but feel that what he had done had been incredibly stupid. A sudden disturbing thought occurred to him. 'I should apologise to Snape.'

He frowned at the thought, and then laughed, shaking his head. He didn't know where that had come from. However, as he made his way up to Gryffindor Tower, he couldn't dismiss the idea from his mind.

oOo

The next day after potions, Harry caught Malfoy as the Slytherin was leaving the classroom. They had finished a little early and the corridor was empty as classes were still in.

Malfoy gave him a bored look. "What do you want, Potter?"

"Just to talk."

“Well I do hope you aren’t going to run away again if I say something you don’t like, and we both know there’s a high chance of that happening.”

Harry heaved a sigh. “Look, I’ve thought about what you said. I hate arguing about that stuff, and if I can’t change your mind, then it’s your loss.”

He held up his hand to stall Malfoy when the boy glared and started to speak. “Also, I told my friends that they should be accepting of me, and now I’ve been being a complete hypocrite because I haven’t been accepting of you. I may not agree with your beliefs and ideals, but I should respect them, no matter how wrong I think they are, especially since I was the one who initiated this thing between us.”

Malfoy stared thoughtfully at Harry, his eyebrow raised, and Harry could tell he was surprised. “I had no idea you could speak so intelligently, Potter. Apology accepted.”

“I wasn’t apologising!” he retorted indignantly, and Malfoy smirked.

-

“It sounded awfully like one to me.”

Harry crossed his arms and glared at the Slytherin.

...

Harry was joined for lunch by Pandora, who had also finished early, and they chatted amiably until the bell went signalling the end of classes. They walked through the grounds to Greenhouse Three for Herbology, where they worked in partners on the Snargaluff pods provided by Professor Sprout.

At the end of the lesson as Pandora was taking their bowl of pods up to Professor Sprout, Malfoy sidled up to Harry.

“So now that you’re over your little huff, can we go back down to the chamber tonight?”

Harry scowled at Malfoy, but muttered. "Fine, I'll meet you after dinner."

At that point, Pandora got back, scowling at Malfoy, who gave a winning smile and strolled back to his own workbench.

"I don't know why you put up with that prat, Harry. I feel sorry for you having to partner with him in Defence and Potions. If it were me, I'd have hexed him by now."

Harry gave Pandora a small smile. "Believe me; the thought has crossed my mind."

oOo

That night after dinner, Harry stood from the table and said goodbye to Pandora.

"Oh wait! I'm done." She took a few quick bites of her pasta and stood. "I'll come with you. See you later guys!" She waved good bye to several other students and stepped over the bench.

"Er, Pandora? You don't have to come, I was just going back to the Tower."

She slapped him lightly on the arm. "Don't be silly, I want to come. I need to get started on my Charms essay."

Harry sighed and tried to come up with a good excuse to ditch Pandora. He'd been coming up with a lot of them lately, sometimes he had to practically hide from her. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy her company, when it was just the two of them she seemed to quieten down a bit, but she wanted to hang out all the time.

"Mr. Potter, where do you think you are going?"

Harry turned at the sound of Snape's voice.

"I believe you have a detention to attend?"

Harry had completely forgotten about detention.

-

"I would suggest you be in my office on five minutes. Fear not, Miss Noksmyth, you'll have your friend back in not time, he should be done by nine." Snape swept away, leaving Harry scowling at Snape's insinuation.

"Sorry about that, he's a git."

Pandora laughed. "Oh, I don't worry about him. I'll see you later."

She waved cheerfully and skipped off towards Ron and Hermione who had just exited the Great Hall.

Hermione gave him a sad look, but Ron didn't even spare him a glance. It had been some time since they had started fighting, and he was surprised Hermione hadn't attempted to talk to him.

Trudging down to Snape's office, he encountered Malfoy.

"I see you got rid of Noksmyth fairly quickly tonight."

Harry scowled. "It wasn't my doing. It was Snape, reminding of my detention that did it."

"What!" whined Malfoy. "You didn't tell me you had a detention!"

"Because. I. Forgot." Said Harry slowly. He remembered that he might have someone from the Order following him, though it was unlikely if he was going straight from dinner to Snape's office. To be safe, he lowered his voice.

"Look, Snape told Pandora it should be done by nine, so come along by then and I'll meet you."

"Outside the bathroom?"

"I suppose, but first I need you to come down here. I might need you to hold Pandora up a bit while I slip away. She could be planning on coming down and meeting me, and then I'll never get away from her."

Malfoy smirked. "Really got yourself a hanger-on, don't you?"

Harry grimaced a bit. "She isn't that bad."

"Whatever. I'll see you later."

"Yeah."

Harry reached Snape's office door and knocked. Entering at Snape's command, he spent another night writing lines.

...

When Snape let him go, Harry left the office and looked up and down the corridor. Pandora was nowhere in sight, and he hoped Malfoy had held her up so he didn't run into her. He got to the Entrance Hall without difficulty, but once there he heard Pandora's voice and suppressed a laugh as he ducked into a side corridor.

"If you don't let me go Malfoy, I swear I'll hex you to hell and back!"

-

"Come now, my dear Pandora. We were having such fun." said Malfoy in an exaggerated cheerful voice, his tone going up and down comically.

"Aagh!" Pandora gave a frustrated little scream. "Leave me ALONE!"

"Shall I escort you back to Gryffindor Tower. It is the gentlemanly thing to do."

"How many times do I have to say it! I'm going to the dungeons!"

"Why didn't you say so?" replied Malfoy, clapping his hands excitedly. "I'm going there myself!"



“Not with me you’re not! Argh! You’ve made me late!”

Harry snickered as Pandora’s shadow ran past the corridor he was in, and he heard Malfoy call, “Farewell, darling. Owl me.”

Finally allowing himself to laugh, he stepped out and ascended the steps to where Malfoy was waiting. “You really can be the most frustratingly annoying person when you put your mind to it,” Harry managed to choke out between his chuckles.

“I do try.”

They made their way down to the chamber. “Want to have another go at practicing the animagus transformation tonight?”

“Alright. I’ve had a few goes this past week, but haven’t noticed any changes. Have you?”

“Er... to be quite honest I haven’t attempted it since the first time,” replied Harry sheepishly.

Malfoy rolled his eyes and threw his hands up. “What did I tell you, Potter, you have to be dedicated. That doesn’t mean have a go every few weeks.”

Harry clucked his tongue. “I know that, Malfoy. I’ve just been busy.”

“So have I, and I have more classes than you, but you don’t see me making excuses, do you?”

Harry muttered something unintelligible.

Malfoy suddenly turned to him. “Which reminds me. If what you’ve been ‘busy’ doing is wandering the castle through the paintings, stop it.”

Harry smirked.

“Don’t smirk at me! I was extremely unimpressed to come into my personal space and find you in there.”

“Well I didn’t know whose room it was, did I?”

“That doesn’t matter. You shouldn’t snoop.”

“I wasn’t snooping.”

“Close enough, if you ask me.”

-

“Whatever. So you said you get your own room cos you’re a prefect. None of the Gryffindor prefects get their own; at least, Ron and Hermione don’t.”

“I don’t know. Maybe they turned the offer down because they prefer sharing.” Malfoy snorted at the concept. “Or maybe Gryffindor Tower is smaller than the Slytherin area.”

“I suppose. I mean, we only have the tower, you’ve got the dungeons and obviously the tower.”

“Well, there aren’t many of us in the tower, as it’s only quite small. Just the fifth, sixth and seventh year prefects.”

By this time, they were seated on the emerald couch, and Salazar had slithered down to crawl onto Malfoy’s leg.

“Thiss human iss warm, Haryyy. And he smelsss niccce.”

Harry laughed. “He likes you, you know.”

Malfoy looked up. “The snake?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes, the snake. And his name is Salazar, as I’ve told you a hundred times before.”

Malfoy made a face in reply.

Harry continued. "He thinks you're warm and you smell nice."

Harry noticed a dull flush on the Slytherins neck as he scowled, but he patted the snake softly.

"Harryyyy? Doessss the warm one like meeee?"

"Let me assssk. I'm sssure he doesss, Salzzz."

"That's creepy, you know; hearing that sound from a human."

"So I've been told. Salz wants to know if you like him?"

Malfoy chuckled. "Tell him of course I do. If he wasn't your pet, I'd keep him for myself." Malfoy picked the snake up and put Salz around his neck.

"Salzzz. Good newsss. He saysss of coursse, and if you weren't mine, he'd keep you for himssself."

Salazar let out a hiss of pleasure and wrapped himself tighter around Malfoy's neck.

A few minutes later found Harry sitting once again near the window, clearing his mind and trying to imagine his body morphing. Unfortunately, the exercise produced the same results as the previous week and he roused himself nearly two hours later to find Malfoy gone and Salz back on her dead branch.

When he got back to his dormitory that night, he noticed that Ron's bed was empty. Wondering vaguely where he was but forcing himself not to care, he changed silently into his pyjamas and crawled into bed.

-

oOo

The next morning when he woke, he noticed that Ron's bed was still empty. It was quite early still, and Ron was not generally an early

riser. Frowning, he dressed quickly and went down to the common room. It was empty, and he left straight away for the Great Hall. There were few people in there, most of them teachers. He shot a scowl in Dumbledore's direction when he saw the old wizard getting up and walking towards him.

"Harry, if I could have a word?"

"Of course, sir," he replied, sparing the headmaster the briefest of glances. Dumbledore seated himself next to Harry and fixed him with a penetrating stare.

"It has come to my attention that you put a particularly nasty hex on the trunk in your dormitory. I thought it prudent to inform you that the spell has injured one of your fellow classmates. I would advise you not to use such spells where others could be harmed by them."

Harry gave a wry smile. So that was where Ron was. In the hospital wing, covered in boils.

"Well, headmaster. It came to my attention that my personal belongings were being stolen from said trunk, and I decided it was well-advised to guard against any further thefts."

Dumbledore sighed. "I will have to ask you to remove the curse. I am also still waiting for you to turn in your cloak to me. Perhaps after dinner tonight you might like to stop by my office. I know you will do the right thing, Harry."

Dumbledore stood and walked back to the Head table. Harry silently ranted at the man. He couldn't believe Dumbledore would actually think he was going to bring the cloak to him. "Idiot," muttered Harry.

...

Harry spent up until lunch time working on homework with Pandora, as she had a free day too. After lunch, he didn't feel at all like spending his time cooped up inside, as the day was lovely outside.

“Pandora, want to go flying? You could use one of the school brooms if you don’t have your own.”

“Ugh, no way. I’ll fly when I have to, but brooms and me really do not go, believe me.”

“Oh, well I’m going to go out for a while, so I’ll see you back in the common room later on.”

“Actually, I feel like some fresh air myself. I won’t fly, but I think I’ll bring a book out to the pitch.”

“Alright then.”

They went up to the dorms where Harry grabbed his Dragonfire and Pandora picked up a text on dangerous plants that was recommended reading for Herbology.

Harry spent a blissful afternoon flying, not going back to the castle until dinner, after which he went to his next detention.

-

...

When he got back to the common room that night, he talked to Hermione for the first time in weeks. He noticed people in the room inconspicuously watching them, and fixed a cold scowl on his face.

“Harry, we need to talk.”

“No, I don’t think we do, actually.”

Hermione sighed and Harry noticed that her eyes were glistening. “What you did to Ron was horrible, Harry!”

Ah, so this wasn’t even an attempt to repair the friendship, it was about Ron.

“I didn’t do anything to him, Hermione.”

“You know what I mean; you put that awful curse on your trunk.”

“Well if Ron didn’t see fit to go through my belongings, we wouldn’t have a problem in the first place, would we?”

“That’s not the point Harry! You hurt him.”

“I didn’t hurt him. If he wants to snoop about and try and steal the one of the only things I have from my father for Dumbledore, then he can hack the consequences. I think it would be best if you remembered that, too.”

With that, Harry turned away and stalked up to his dormitory.

oOo

Hehe the whole time I was writing this chapter I kept writing Pooter and Snap instead of Potter and Snape, so if you find any of those that I missed fixing, please ignore them. : )

I was going to keep going on this chapter, but I decided to break it up into two chapters so I can post this one and the next one sooner, which I think is better than one long chapter less often.

oOo

Harry was perusing the Daily Prophet at breakfast the next morning when he spotted an odd article.

## REVIEWER NUMBERS DWINDLING

There are fears this week concerning reviewers after the number of reviews spiralled sharply following the posting of chapter Eighteen. Writers in the world of FanFiction rely on reviews for inspiration and encouragement, and Senior officials at the Ministry dread the public reaction should writers become depressed.

Minister Fudge had this to offer. “It really is tragic when, in these hard times, a writer is not rewarded for their hard work. We can only hope

that our lost reviewers are found, or that other step up to take their place. Both would be best, of course.”

-

If you have any information regarding the missing reviewers, please floo CRIMESTOPPERS. Alternatively, leave a review.

Odd, thought Harry, and he pulled out a parchment and quill, scrawling out a message of support to his favourite FanFiction writer.

And thank you to:

KWGTB: I guess he wasn't really thinking... thanks for reading and reviewing! Much appreciated : )

Vanessa riddle: Hello! As usual, thanks for the review. In answer to your question... it will happen, eventually.

Jabarber69: Yay! A new reviewer. Thanks!

A reader pointed out to me that I said Malfoy was Head Boy, but only in 6th year. Just a mistake, sorry. He's only a prefect.

## The Necessary Steps

Harry was casually reading through the Daily Prophet on Monday morning when a familiar name caught his eye.

### MINISTRY EMPLOYEES MACNAIR, SNELL STILL MISSING

No luck has been had in the search for East London resident Walden Macnair, who has been missing for over a week now.

Macnair, a ministry employee was reported missing on last Tuesday morning by his wife. The Head of the Office for the Control of Magical Creatures for twelve years, Macnair was last seen leaving his office on Sunday afternoon in the company of a fellow worker, Orson Snell, who is also missing.

The Department of Magical Law Enforcement is making enquiries into reports of a scuffle in a back alley of Hogsmeade, where residents reported sounds of a fight between unidentified persons.

The disappearances comes at a time when the safety of all in the Magical community is increasingly at risk, and authorities fear that the missing men may just become more names on the growing list of missing and dead.

The Auror heading up the cases for missing persons, Lawrence Sabadi, has promised that the Department is doing its best to recover lost persons, and urges anybody with information to contact them.

His breath caught in his throat as he finished the article, his eyes staring blankly at the tiny black words as his mind raced. Macnair was missing. Since last Sunday. The day Harry had been chased in Hogsmeade. The day Snape had said he would 'deal with' it.

Harry tore his eyes away from the newspaper, a horrible feeling growing in his gut. His eyes found Snape, sitting at the Head Table between Professor Flitwick and Madam Pomfrey.



He was sipping from a gold goblet, a fork in his other hand as his obsidian eyes rapidly scanning his own paper. What exactly had Snape meant when he'd said 'I shall deal with this'?

-

Harry looked back at the paper, staring unseeingly at the close-packed black letters.

He didn't think it was a coincidence that Macnair had disappeared immediately following what had happened in Hogsmeade, but he wasn't sure if he could believe that Snape had had something to do with Macnair disappearing. And what about Snell? Was he a Death Eater too? Trying hard to banish the thought of Macnair lying dead in a ditch, his eyes flickered unwittingly back to Snape.

Harry started when he found those black eyes boring into him, and he quickly turned back to the paper. After a moment, he sneaked another glance at Snape. The Potions Master was still observing him, and this time raised an elegant eyebrow a fraction of an inch when he caught Harry looking. The expression on Snape's face did not ease Harry's suspicions.

Harry flushed slightly and looked away, suddenly not feeling much like eating. He pushed his plate away and stood, taking the paper with him as he left the hall.

Harry was exceedingly glad that he didn't have Potions that day, but he had an Occlumency lesson after dinner and was not looking forward to facing Snape. He had a feeling the man knew exactly what he was thinking, even without using Legilimency.

...

At 8:00 Harry reluctantly trudged down to the dungeons, taking as long as he possible could to get there. He wound up being a few minutes late, and Snape was far from pleased.

"Late, Potter. Twenty points, I think."

Harry thought this was a bit harsh and mumbled something unintelligible in reply, receiving a condescending scowl from Snape. It seemed the man was in a particularly foul mood this evening.

Pointedly avoiding looking at his teacher, Harry took his usual seat. He knew he was avoiding the inevitable; as soon as he looked at Snape, the man would see Harry's troubled thoughts.

"We shall begin with you once again attempting to throw me from your mind. Sheer will power does not seem to have worked thus far, so I believe we will try another of the approaches which I explained to you in order for you to know what it feels like to throw me from your mind. Once you have perfected that method we will return to using will power alone."

"Yes sir."

"I want you to imagine me in your mind and imagine that you are there also. You will imagine you are holding your wand and you will cast any spell on me you wish that you believe will expel me."

Harry hesitantly dragged his eyes away from a particularly disgusting specimen jar and looked at Snape.

The black haired man leaned forward and clasped his hands on the desk, fixing Harry with a piercing stare. "Legilimens."

He immediately felt the alien presence in his mind, gently probing for Harry's thoughts. Remembering what Snape had said, he pictured Snape standing in his mind. Unfortunately, this -

required light and some sort of floor, changing and weakening Harry's usual barrier, and Snape began to work faster at accessing Harry's thoughts.

Harry focussed on the image of himself standing opposite Snape, wand in hand. Choosing a spell, he raised his wand and pointed it at Snape's sneering face.

“Yisago!”

Harry immediately noticed Snape’s absence from his mind.

“A banishing charm. Appropriate, I suppose.”

Harry grinned at the achievement, though it dimmed when Snape sneered.

“Don’t be so confident, Potter. I offered no resistance. It is easy to remove someone who is not fighting back. Next time, I will fight back.”

Harry deflated as he prepared for another assault on his memories.

Without a word, Snape was once again in Harry’s mind, and Harry focussed on the image of them facing each other. This time however, Snape was not just standing there; rather, he was moving around Harry, searching with one eye and keeping the other on Harry.

Harry assumed a duelling stance and cast the banishing spell again, but it was expertly blocked by Snape with a non-verbal shield.

“Stupefy!” yelled Harry.

Snape conjured a Protego and the spell shot back at Harry, requiring him to create another shield.

In the time it took Harry to do so, Snape darted away into the darkness that surrounded their little circle of light, and Harry took off after him.

Snape was leaving a trail of light that faded quickly, and Harry followed it, soon catching the Potions Master. He fired a spell at Snape’s back but it missed, and Snape spun when he saw the jet of light shoot past him.

Harry dodged a curse and returned his own, and he and Snape were soon engaged in a full on duel. Dimly it registered that not only was Snape fighting him, but he was also trying to access memories at the

same time. He had no idea how Snape could concentrate on the two tasks at once.

At first, they seemed fairly evenly matched in the duel, but Harry just couldn't seem to beat Snape, and the longer they duelled the weaker Harry began to feel. His reflexes were slower and his spells misfired more and more frequently. His shields became weaker until finally a 'Petrificus Totalus' from Snape shattered one, hitting Harry squarely in the chest.

His body became stiff as a board and he felt backwards, though he didn't feel himself hit anything. What worried him more was that almost immediately, his barrier had fallen and Snape was riffling through his thoughts and memories.

-

Harry watched as he flew around the Quidditch Pitch... as he ran through a dirty alley in Hogsmeade, footsteps pounding behind him... Macnair was levelling his wand at Harry... Snape was handing Harry his cloak, telling Harry he would 'deal with this.'...

Harry was standing for a second in Snape's office again before his knees collapsed from under him and hit the hard stone floor.

"Pathetic." Harry could hear the sneer in Snape's voice. "Get up, Potter."

Harry climbed to his feet, breathing heavily.

"I trust now you see the danger in leaving your thoughts open? Had that been another browsing your memories, perhaps one of the Dark Lord's servants, my life would be forfeit," hissed Snape venomously, and Harry lowered his eyes, feeling suddenly guilty.

"You still have very far to go Potter, before I am satisfied that I am safe, and until then I will not deign to worry about teaching you to stop these visions of yours, do you understand?"

Harry swallowed and answered, his voice soft and shaking a bit. "Yes sir."

He was now feeling extremely down, especially at the ease with which Snape had gotten into his memories. True, he hadn't been concentrating on his barrier, but he needed to be able to do both that and expel Snape at the same time. Otherwise, a Legilimens would gradually weaken his barrier, eventually gaining access to his memories because Harry couldn't throw them out. He also couldn't understand how his duelling skills had been so bad. He knew Snape was good, but he'd been beaten far too easily.

Snape seemed to realise what he was thinking, (or maybe he used Legilimency without Harry knowing) because his next comments addressed Harry's concerns. "Duelling in the mind is not the same as duelling physically. True, natural talent is needed, but it goes only a short way. It is more about mental endurance and strength, the same as Occlumency is. That is why I was able to disarm you so effectively, because my mental faculties are somewhat superior to yours." Snape sniffed disdainfully before taking a seat.

"As it seems this has exhausted you so, we will try once more and then you may go. This time sit."

Harry did as he was told and once again Snape wordlessly entered his mind. Harry's attempt to banish Snape from his mind proved to be as unsuccessful as the last, only he was subdued much more quickly, and Snape was yet again riffling through Harry's memories.

This time Harry watched as he read the paper in the Hall that morning, and he desperately tried to resurrect his barriers. He might not be able to throw Snape out, but he could still (hopefully) stop Snape from seeing that Harry had seen the article.

Unfortunately, Harry was too tired, and his efforts had minimal effect. He watched as his eyes darted back and forth between the newspaper and the Snape at the Head Table.

Watching from this perspective, he could see that he looked very obvious, and Snape had caught onto it earlier than Harry had realised. Snape was observing Harry now and then, several minutes before Harry had caught his eyes.

Huffing in resignation, he waited for Snape to be done. Snape sensed that he had given up and withdrew from Harry's head, leaving Harry with the usual headache that followed Occlumency lessons.

"Pitiful. I expect an improvement when next I see you. You may go."

Harry looked up at Snape and blinked stupidly. "That's all?" He had been expecting Snape to say something, to defend himself at the least. Perhaps Harry had misread the situation entirely; perhaps Snape had nothing to do with Macnair's disappearance?

"Yes, that's all. Get out now, Potter. I do not desire to suffer your presence any longer than is necessary." Snape waved a hand towards the door, not looking up from where he had begun looking over some document.

For some reason, Harry could not leave. For some reason, he needed to know what had happened after he had left the alleyway that day. "But—"

"But nothing!" snarled Snape, glaring up at Harry.

"Sir—"

"I will not tolerate your insolence, you impertinent brat!" spat Snape, a look of barely suppressed rage in his eyes. "I told you to leave, and I expect you to do so immediately."

"Just tell me!"

Snape jumped to his feet, his face livid, and Harry knew that Snape knew exactly what he wanted.

“Go to the Headmaster’s office immediately!” Snape slammed a fist down on his desk, the other hand pointing a long white finger towards the door.

Harry stood as well, trying to project a bold front. “I just have to know! Was it you?”

Snape didn’t answer. Instead, he strode around the desk in the blink of an eye and grabbed Harry by the neck of his robes, propelling him to the door. He threw it open and shoved Harry into the corridor. “Headmaster’s office, now!”

Before Harry could even turn around, the door had slammed behind him and he was alone in the dark corridor. Running a hand through his hair in frustration, he gave an aggravated sigh and left the dungeons, heading to Dumbledore’s office.

As he stood on the winding staircase that took him up to the circular office, he rubbed tiredly at his eyes, trying to relieve his pounding headache as he pondered what he was supposed to say.

He was saved from trying to explain why he was there when he knocked and entered to find Dumbledore in a discussion with Snape, whose head sat in the fireplace.

-

At the sight of Harry, Snape sneered. “I trust you’ll deal with this to my satisfaction, Albus.”

Dumbledore inclined his head to Snape and the man’s head disappeared from the flames.

“Harry, take a seat.” Dumbledore indicated to a chair in front of the big desk and Harry did as he was told.

He opened his mouth to explain himself, but Dumbledore held up a hand to silence him. The headmaster took his own seat behind the desk and fixed Harry with a piercing stare. “Professor Snape informs me that you have realised the full repercussion of your actions.”

Harry opened and closed his mouth several times, trying to find something to say in response to that.

“So Snape did... do something.”

“Professor Snape, Harry, and if you mean he dealt with the situation you found yourself in last weekend, then yes, he did do something.”

“Did he kill them?” Harry asked bluntly.

Dumbledore eyed him appraisingly. “Professor Snape is required to do many things which, under normal circumstances, he would rather not. Unfortunately this was one of them.”

“But he didn’t have to kill them! Why couldn’t he just Obliviate them or something, or have the Aurors arrest them?”

Dumbledore sighed wearily. “Harry, it is not so simple as that. We both know Azkaban is hardly the fortress it once was, and had their memories been erased, that does not mean they would not still be accessible using the right kind of magic. We could not risk revealing Professor Snape’s position as a spy, and so the necessary steps were taken to avoid that.”

“Necessary steps...” repeated Harry slowly.

“Yes, and I’m sure you can now understand why Professor Snape is so angry with you right now. He has every right to be.”

“I couldn’t have known what was going to happen!” he defended.

“There was no reason why you should have, Harry. You disobeyed school rules and put yourself in a position of danger. Your actions forced Professor Snape to commit murder, Harry.”

Harry felt himself grow cold, shame building in the pit of his stomach. He knew there was nothing he could say to defend himself; Dumbledore was right. He dropped his head, waiting for Dumbledore to speak again.



"I would suggest you think seriously about your actions and how they affect others, Harry. Professor Snape is extremely angry right now, and he is not the only one who could have been hurt due to your lack of thought. He wishes me to punish you quite severely, but as you have already been -

punished for Hogsmeade, I think I can only take twenty points and give you detention for your disrespect towards Professor Snape this evening."

"Yes sir," he whispered.

"Also, I have noticed that you still manage to disappear by yourself for hours on end. We have discussed this; you know I do not like it. I hope it will stop."

Harry couldn't say he didn't disappear by himself, so he just answered in the affirmative and was dismissed by Dumbledore.

As he trudged back to Gryffindor Tower, he reflected on what he had done. He felt more guilty than ever about what he had done, and stupid for trying to get Snape to admit it.

He also couldn't help dwelling on how many people had told him to think before he acted, and how not doing so caused people to get hurt.

He squared his shoulders. If he was going to think before acting, he needed to know all the details, and the only way he was going to do that was to continue spying on the Order.

It might be wrong to do so; what if he was caught? But he was the one who had to defeat Voldemort, and he wasn't going to be able to without taking the necessary steps, as Dumbledore had put it. In his opinion, the necessary steps included being as prepared as he could for anything, and that included really trying to learn the magic of the enemy, and knowing the plans of both his enemies and friends.

oOo

The next day, Harry saw Snape in Potions. Snape was his usual malevolent self, but for once he didn't direct his ire at Harry. He still took disproportionate amounts of points from Gryffindor, but not once did he comment on Harry's appearance, potion, homework, or any of the other things he usually would have. Instead, he ignored Harry completely, not even glancing up when he handed in a sample of the potion they had brewed that day.

This behaviour was extremely off putting, because he didn't know if he should be expecting Snape to lash out suddenly, and he didn't like the idea of being lulled into a false sense of security. Harry was confused at the beginning of the lesson, then he was relaxed but wary, then slightly nervous, and by the end of the lesson, he was feeling troubled.

It wasn't that he particularly minded Snape ignoring him; in fact he had always wished for it. Now however, Snape's complete indifference made Harry realise that he had seriously offended the man, and it only served to remind him of his mistakes.

...

Harry was leaning against the wall outside the transfiguration classroom listening to Pandora chatter when a picture down the hall caught his eye. He had forgotten lately his attempts to find other paintings that he could go through.

-

The picture that held his attention was a large one, about two metres high and sitting a half a metre off of the ground. Wanting to get a better look, he detached himself from the wall and walked towards it, motioning for Pandora to follow.

The painting itself depicted a spidery which standing in a stone room, poised to cast a spell.

But that was not what interested Harry. What intrigued him was the frame of the painting. From afar it had looked like any other wooden

frame, but up close he could see that the frame was carved to look like intertwined snakes, all around the painting.

“What is it Harry?”

“Oh, just looking at this painting here. Interesting, don’t you think?”

Pandora shrugged noncommittally. “I suppose.”

Just then, McGonagall came around the corner and the class began to file in to the classroom. Deciding he would have to come back later, he let Pandora drag him away.

...

Harry and Pandora were leaving lunch when he heard his name called.

“Harry!”

Harry turned, grinning broadly at the familiar voice. “Professor Lupin!”

The man chuckled. “I thought I told you to call me Remus. Moony, even. I’m not your professor anymore.”

“Sorry Remus. I guess it’s kind of hard to get over the habit.”

Harry remembered Pandora. “Er, Remus. This is Pandora. She’s new this year.”

Lupin favoured Pandora with a friendly smile as the girl held her hand out, blushing slightly. Harry rolled his eyes, and was surprised when Lupin took her hand, kissing it lightly.

“A pleasure to meet you, Pandora.”

Pandora giggled and stepped away again. Harry shook his head slightly, rolling his eyes again.

Lupin turned back to Harry, putting an arm around his shoulder and pulling him away from Pandora a bit. "So, how have you been?"

"Good, mostly."

"Classes going well?"

"Better than ever. Even potions is going well."

Remus' eyes sparkled. "I'll bet Severus isn't happy about that."

-

"He does seem to find it difficult to actually admit I deserve to be in the class," Harry replied, grinning. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"I was in Hogsmeade and thought I'd drop by to see you. It's been far too long since I saw you last."

"Don't worry about it. I know you're busy with Order stuff. I'm glad to see you when I can."

"And I you. How are you doing with Quidditch? Still a star seeker I hear."

Harry grinned at the praise and laughed. "Who told you that?"

"Severus actually, in his own roundabout way."

Harry must have looked shocked, because Lupin rushed to reassure him. "I mostly gathered that you were doing well through various insults about the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and the like."

Harry rolled his eyes. "That sounds about right."

"Well, don't tell him I told you." Lupin winked.

"So where have you been lately? You haven't said much in your letters."

“Here and there. I spent a fair amount of time in France, trying to convince a werewolf colony there to join us, or at the very least remain neutral.”

“How’d it go?”

“Quite well. I’m confident they have no intention of joining You-Know-Who, but whether or not they will pledge their allegiance to us is another matter altogether.”

“I suppose there’s nothing wrong with neutralism.”

“No, not at all.”

“Will you be staying for dinner?”

“No, I can’t stay long at all, actually. I have an appointment in London in half an hour.”

“Oh, ok. Well maybe next time you can stay.”

“Hopefully... Harry, there is something I was hoping to discuss with you before I left.”

“What?” asked Harry curiously.

Remus appeared uncomfortable. “Dumbledore mentioned that you’ve been a little distant with your friends lately. Anything you want to talk about?”

Harry stopped and clenched his jaw. So that was the real reason Lupin was here. “And now we come to the actual reason you came to talk to me.” He spat, quickly getting angry at the deception.

“You know it would have been nice if you’d come to see me because you wanted to, not because Dumbledore asked you to!”

“Harry! Of course I wanted to see you! You should never think otherwise.”

-

"Then why haven't you ever come before. Why wait until Dumbledore asks you to?"

Remus sighed, not denying it. "Harry, you've said yourself I am very busy. Sometimes it's hard for me to get away. The fact that Dumbledore asked me to talk to you doesn't change the fact that I wanted to see you anyway."

Harry sneered. "Well, make sure you find another reason to come see me real soon." With that he turned and stormed off, leaving a dejected Lupin standing in the Entrance Hall.

...

Harry spent herbology stewing in his thoughts, and refused to tell Pandora what had happened when she asked. He was unsure if he had reacted in an overly harsh manner towards Remus, thinking maybe he was angrier at Dumbledore's use of his friends to get to him than at Lupin himself.

Dumbledore's machinations were really starting to annoy Harry.

oOo

On Wednesday Harry woke early. The sun was just peeking over the edge of the horizon, but he couldn't sleep again. He dressed quietly and made his way out of the portrait hole.

As Harry walked down the empty corridor, the only sound he could hear was his feet hitting the stone. He frowned. Or was it?

Stopping abruptly, he heard a footfall behind him, and spun around. There was no one there.

He supposed it must be the auror Owens, or maybe Tonks that was following him, perhaps wearing an invisibility cloak. He spun around again, and this time his eyes focussed for a split second on a spot of air twenty metres down the hall.

There was nothing there now, but he was sure for a tiny instant when he had spun that the air had shimmered. Not an invisibility cloak then. Perhaps a disillusionment charm? Disillusionment charms didn't make you invisible exactly, they made you look like whatever was behind or around you, so when you moved, the spell changed, sometimes causing a ripple in the air.

Satisfied that he was right, he sped up a bit while he took out his invisibility cloak and put it on. At the same time, he took out the Pendant, and as soon as he knew he was invisible, he apparated to the corridor outside the kitchens.

Deciding he would need to be more careful when he went to the Chamber, especially with Malfoy, he entered the kitchen for some breakfast.

...

After breakfast, Harry went down to the chamber and took out a quill and parchment. He had two apologies to write.

-

The first was for Remus. Though Harry wished Remus had come to see him without bringing up something on Dumbledore's orders, he realised he had been a bit harsh in the way he had reacted. He wasn't going to apologise for saying what he did, just the way he said it.

Dear Remus,

I want to apologise for the way I reacted on Tuesday. I was more angry at Dumbledore than you, and I over reacted. I hope next time you come to see me it will be because you wanted to and not for any other reason. I'll look forward to seeing you again.

Harry

Satisfied that it was alright and got his message across, he rolled it up and secured it with a piece of string, leaving it on the table to take up to the Owlery.

The next letter was considerably more difficult to write. The longer he had thought about it, the guiltier he had felt and the more he had felt the need to apologise to Snape. It wasn't something he particularly wanted to do, but it was something he needed to do, if only for his own peace of mind.

D ear Snape,

Harry crossed that out. It was far too friendly, and sounded stupid. He doubted Snape would appreciate such an inane platitude as 'dear' anyway.

Professor Snape,

...

A half an hour later, he still hadn't come up with anything he thought Snape would find suitable. He wanted it to be as good as he could get it. He knew Snape would appreciate it being articulate, the grammar correct, with no spelling errors or extraneous statements.

It was harder than he thought to make the apology sound formal without making it seem too brief and fake. The one thing he wanted most was for it to sound genuine.

He decided to give it a rest and come back to it later, choosing instead to work on his Ancient Runes homework.

oOo

The next day, Harry was forcibly reminded of the apology when in Potions, Harry was again completely ignored by Snape. Beside him, Malfoy raised a questioning eyebrow after the third time Snape passed by their cauldron and didn't so much as glance at Harry, though he did tell Malfoy that the potion they were creating was going well.



Harry returned Malfoy's silent question with a shrug, reminding himself to finish the apology soon.

oOo

-

On Friday night Harry arrived at the astronomy tower to find he was the last in the class to arrive. It was a partially cloudy night, not really the best for stargazing, but the teacher had not cancelled the class. The Hufflepuffs were giggling over on their side of the tower, and beside them the Ravenclaws were talking amicably.

Harry carried his telescope over next to Malfoy and began to set it up. He unrolled his star chart and placed it on a conjured desk beside Malfoy's chart.

"I wish those bloody Hufflepuffs would shut it!" muttered Malfoy once Harry had finished setting up.

Harry had to agree, their incessant giggling was already starting to annoy him, and he'd only been there a few minutes.

The professor set them to mapping a particular quadrant of the sky, and they did their best to work around the clouds. Harry found it annoying that he would bend down to mark a star out and when he looked back into the telescope, all he was met by was a grey fog.

Towards the end of the lesson, the clouds all but covered the sky and Harry gave up. The next time he bent to write, instead of marking out a star, he scrawled a quick note to Malfoy.

Chamber?

He pushed it over towards Malfoy a bit so that the Slytherin would know it was for him. Malfoy cast him a sideways glance and raised an eyebrow, but made no move to read the note until he bent down to make a mark on his star sheet.

Harry read the note when Malfoy pushed it back.

Ok.

He wrote a quick instruction and nudged it towards Malfoy.

Go alone and I'll meet you there.

When the Professor told them to pack up, Harry cast a quick Incendio on the small bit of parchment and packed up his things slowly so that Malfoy left a few minutes before him.

The staircase leading down from the astronomy tower was a tight winding one, and Harry felt beneath his robes for the pendant as he left the tower. He hadn't noticed if anyone was following, but both Owens and Tonks were Ministry trained Aurors, so that might not happen even if they were. He took the first few steps slowly, but when he got right near the bottom he went as fast as he could.

When he was certain anyone who might have been following him couldn't see him, he apparated straight in to the girls' bathroom.

It was empty, and Harry briefly considered that Malfoy would wonder how he got there. Shrugging it aside, he walked over to the door and opened it to find Malfoy leaning against the opposite wall and checking his watch.

-

Malfoy looked up at the sound of the door opening and a frown formed on his face. "Where'd you come from?"

Harry shrugged. "I've just been waiting in here. You coming or what?"

Malfoy eyed him suspiciously and stepped into the room. "I left before you."

"I guess the way I came was just faster."

“Hm.” Malfoy looked at him in silence for a few moments before continuing. “Why did you wait behind?”

Harry turned away to open the sink. “I’m being followed.”

Malfoy scoffed as he followed Harry down into the tunnel. “Followed? By who?”

“Not sure, exactly, but they’re Ministry Aurors.”

“Why are Ministry Aurors following you around?”

“Dumbledore’s orders. He claims it’s because he wants to keep me safe, but it’s making it difficult to get down here when I want.”

“How do you know this?”

Harry gave Malfoy a sidelong look. “I overheard a conversation or two.”

Malfoy smirked. “Eavesdropping, Potter? Or spying?”

Harry returned the smirk. “A little of both.”

Malfoy became serious. “Are you sure they didn’t follow you? Because it wouldn’t be good for us to be seen together.”

“That’s certainly true. That’s why I told you to just meet me here.”

Down in the library they decided to work on their animagus transformations. Neither of them had had any luck yet, and after an hour more of ‘imagining what it would feel like to transform’ Harry was feeling a bit frustrated.

Apparently Malfoy was as well, because after a while he got up, grabbing fistfuls of hair and growling in frustration.

Harry watched in amusement as the Slytherin threw cushions around the room. “Problem, Malfoy?”

Malfoy flung himself onto the lounge and crossed his arms huffily. "It isn't working! We've been at this for weeks now, and there hasn't been one change, not one!"

"You're the one that said it would take time and dedication and really, a few weeks isn't that long for something like this."

-

Malfoy ran a hand through his hair, that was for once not slicked with gel, in exasperation. "I know, I know. It's just that I thought there'd be something by now. I mean, I have a picture in my head of a dragon, and nothing is happening."

"Maybe you aren't a dragon at all. The book did say that if you were visualising the wrong animal then nothing would happen."

"But I have to be a dragon!" stressed Malfoy. "There's nothing else I can see myself as!"

Harry grinned wickedly. "Maaaybeee... no, no don't worry."

Malfoy narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "What, Potter?"

"Well I was just thinking of another animal that might suit you. A certain little furry white rodent..."

Malfoy jumped up, grabbing a cushion off the lounge and hurling it across the room at Harry's head. "I am not a ferret!"

Harry burst out laughing at Malfoy's indignant expression as the Slytherin sat glaring at Harry and muttering under his breath.

Calming himself down, Harry tried to appease Malfoy. "Look, if you really think you're a dragon, maybe you are. But maybe you should just try doing it the way the book said, instead of visualising the whole animal at once. The way you're doing it is probably too much for the first change to take place."

"I 'spose," grumbled Malfoy.

Harry stood and yawned. "Well, I'm off to bed."

"But it's only eleven!"

"Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw game tomorrow, remember?"

"Oh, yeah."

"You don't mind going back through the tunnels do you?"

"No," replied Malfoy, standing up and grabbing his bag.

Harry left his bag where it was and deposited Salz on a heat rock he had put on the coffee table before going into the room of requirement. He imagined a huge, comfortable bed, and one appeared before him.

"You sleep here?" came Malfoy's voice from the doorway.

Harry turned and shrugged. "Sometimes. This bed is way more comfortable than the one in the Tower, and unlike you, I'm not a prefect, so I never got the option of having my own room."

"Well if you hadn't spent your first five years breaking rules you might have had a chance."

-

"I'll have you know that any time I was breaking rules, Ron and Hermione were right there with me, and they're Gryffindor prefects, so I don't think you can use that as an argument."

Malfoy gave a small chuckle. "Mm. Perhaps not."

oOo

On Saturday, Harry woke early and went down to the Great Hall, broom in hand. He was slightly worried about their match with Ravenclaw today. Ravenclaw had been playing very well lately, and as much as Harry hated to admit it, his team hadn't been. Practices

had been awful, mostly because no one seemed to want to work with him. They would do what he said for the most part, but the disharmony in the team wasn't working well for them.

After eating a quick breakfast, he grabbed a few more pieces of toast and left the Hall, making his way down to the Quidditch Pitch. Standing in the middle of the field, he studied the playing conditions. It was windy, which would affect play, and the sun was bright, which meant the chasers would have to be careful not to pass into the sun. On the other hand, it might make the golden snitch easier to spot.

He relayed his observations to the rest of the team when they met in the changing rooms, but decided to forego the usual encouragement speech, as no one seemed to be paying that much attention to him. Trying not to get angry about it, he checked over his broom, straightening out a few twigs.

He hadn't given his broom a tune-up or even a polish since he'd brought it, and decided he would do so after the game.

Harry shook hands with the Ravenclaw captain and the teams took to the air. Harry relished the feel of wind on his face and did a few quick laps of the pitch. Down below, Madame Hooch released the Bludgers, Quaffle, and lastly the Golden Snitch, which disappeared immediately.

Gryffindor scored first, and it visibly bolstered the team's spirits. They scored again five minutes later, the Gryffindor stands roaring in response.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Cho tracking him, and he put on a burst of speed.

He personally couldn't see the point in tailing the other team's seeker; no doubt it was a benefit to keep an eye on them in case they spotted the snitch first, but if you were tailing them, you were, by definition, behind them. If Harry spotted the Snitch, Cho really had no chance at all, because she would never catch Harry's broom.

This philosophy proved true not five minutes later when Harry spotted the Snitch halfway down the pitch and several metres overhead.

Before he had time to think about it, he had shot off, streaking down the pitch.

The wind whistled in his ears as he drew closer to the tiny golden ball, and he was about thirty metres away when a chaser from the Ravenclaw team intentionally placed himself in Harry's way.

-

Harry was forced to swerve to avoid a collision, and in that time, the Snitch disappeared. Loud boos could be heard from the Gryffindor stands.

Luckily, Cho failed to keep up the chase either, and given that Harry had nearly beat her to the Snitch, changed tactics and started circling the pitch on her own.

After that, Ravenclaw efficiently topped Gryffindor's winning score with three of their own, to loud encouragement from the Ravenclaw stands.

It was fifteen minutes later when each team had scored another goal when Harry again caught sight of the Snitch.

It was being billowed about in the rough winds, changing speed and direction abruptly.

Harry took off after it, and it whizzed away, its speed accelerated by the wind. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Ravenclaw seeker closing in from his side as noise went up from the stands.

The snitch turned left and Harry shot after it, now heading directly for Cho. There was a lull in the wind, allowing Harry to gain ground on the Snitch.

He slowly drew closer to the Snitch, and Cho. If one of them didn't pull up, there was going to be a nasty collision, but Harry refused to give in.

Suddenly, the Snitch turned sharply upwards, and both Harry and Cho followed it, having been seconds from crashing into each other.

They battled to get ahead of each other, their outstretched arms jostling one another.

Harry's broom was faster than Cho's, and he pulled ahead a little. A sudden gust of wind blew against the Snitch, and it blew backwards a bit. Harry jerked his arm quickly to the right and felt the thrill of victory as his fingers closed around the tiny golden snitch, its white wings whipping in the wind.

The Gryffindor stands roared in triumph, and for the first time in a while, Harry remembered what it was like to have friends and to be liked.

He closed his eyes, savouring the feeling while it lasted, for as soon as he opened his eyes he saw the rest of the team converging on the ground, congratulating each other on the win. No one looked twice at him.

Swallowing tightly, he did a slow lap of the field as the crowds started to dissipate and his team left for the changing rooms. Then, he descended to the ground where Madam Hooch was packing up the balls.

"Congratulations, Mr. Potter. A fine catch, as always." She gave him a warm smile as she took the Snitch from him.

"Thanks, Madam Hooch."

The teacher clasped the lid of the metal box shut and levitated it ahead of her as she left to store it in the broom shed.

Looking around at the now empty stands, Harry took to the sky again, going higher and higher until the Quidditch pitch was the size of a basketball below him.



He sat there for a while gazing at the castle, when he noticed a figure on a broom climbing towards him. As the flyer got closer, he recognised the pearly white hair and pale skin.

“Malfoy. What are you doing up here?”

“Let’s say I missed our usual broom rides from the Christmas holidays.”

Harry snorted. “Right.”

They sat in silence for a few moments, Malfoy doing several loops on his custom made broom.

“You know, this is the second time your team has played atrociously.”

Harry scowled at the smug Slytherin. “I really don’t need you to point that out to me, Malfoy.”

“It’s lucky they have a decent seeker, otherwise you’d probably be at the bottom of the ladder.”

“That sounds suspiciously like a compliment.”

“Just an observation.”

“Hmph. Anyway, we didn’t play that badly. We were only ten points behind when I caught the Snitch.”

“Still, you can’t deny that you Gryffindors have dropped a level.”

“Look Malfoy, if you just came up here to have a go, you can bugger off, because I don’t want to hear it. We won and that’s all that matter.”

Malfoy held up his hands in a mock defensive gesture. “Okay, don’t get upset. I’m only up here because our team has practice in a minute.”

Harry looked to the ground and saw several other green robed figures climbing onto their brooms.

“Well, I’m going in for lunch then. Bye.”

“Bye. Nice catch by the way.”

oOo

Sorry this took a bit longer to get out. I’ve been reallyreallyreally busy lately. Hopefully the next chapter won’t take so long, as I’ve already written a bit of it. Hope everyone is enjoying the story. : )

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ReViEwErS!

Thankyouthankyouthankyou!!

Twenty (20!) reviews for last chapter. Yay!

And guess what! Nearly at 100 reviews!

Roxoan: Thanks for the long review! Hope you like this chapter. I’m trying to think up some ways Harry could use the pendant more, so hopefully i’ll come up with something interesting. : )

Kaeim: hehe Ron is not going to die, but thanks for reviewing! I always like to hear what readers want to happen.

Jacob kennedy: Don’t worry, it is going to happen. Glad you’re enjoying it.

Befread: Hehe! You made me laugh. Special thanks : )

Voldemort is Dead: ;) I like to think Dumbledore has wards so that even the elves can’t just apparate into his office, and no doubt Snape would, too. Thanks for reviewing!

Vanessa riddle: hehe. I’m sorry updating took so long. Hopefully the chappie was worth the wait. Until next time : )

3cheers4Snape: Hi! Thanks for reviewing. Nah, not going to be a DMHP story. On your last point: soon, probably. I don't know how good i am at writing 'someone gets angry' scenes, but hopefully it'll be good. : )

Jensindenial3516: Thanks for reviewing!

Crius: Great review, thanks! Love it that you love the story. Hm, maybe I should write in another defence lesson... And don't worry, Harry will figure it out. I have been dropping some hints for Harry, like you pointed out. Hope you keep liking the story : )

The Lady Snape: I haven't decided if Snape'll figure it out. He certainly will begin to suspect something, but whether or not he works it out I don't know. As for Dumbledore, I hope he doesn't seem really evil or anything, just a bit manipulative. Kind of like he is in the books, only a bit more and in my story Harry actually realises it. Thanks for reviewing : )

Allyanna: Thankyou! Always good to hear that.

Twilightna: Thanks!

Keitaya: Thanks for the review : )

Palmoni: good, good.

Justame: Thanks : )

KWGTB: Haven't quite worked that out for myself (but working on it) thanks for reviewing, as always. : )

Andie: Yay! Thankyou. I do try : )

A: Thanks for pointing that out. Just a mistake. Thanks for reviewing.

Blackphoenixmage: Thanks for the review! R and H aren't being paid or anything, but they think they're doing the right thing.

Mad Mogg: Oh, that was just a silly thing at the end. He doesn't really know about FF. Thankyou for reviewing : )

Pgkpjs: Thankyou! My favourite kind of review : )

## Easter

Harry avoided the common room, not really feeling up to going to the party to celebrate their victory over Ravenclaw. Instead, he took his broom down to the chamber and went out into the little courtyard. Getting on, he jumped off the edge of the courtyard in to the canyon, letting himself and the broom go in freefall.

About thirty metres above the water he pulled up, and sped off up the roaring river, spray from the white water misting over him. Even now that the weather was warming up, the water was still quite cool, and he thought the water could be melt water from the snow in the mountains.

When he was out of sight of the castle, he came to a halt and sat on his broom for a while, clearing his mind and forgetting everything.

oOo

The next day, Harry decided to go down to the chamber and finish his assignments. As next week was the last week before the Easter break, there were a number of assignments due, and the school's library was full of students researching and writing, trying desperately to complete their work. He was surprised to find Malfoy pacing back and forth in front of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

The Slytherin saw him when he turned to pace back the other way. "About time, Potter! I've been waiting for ages!" he complained, dragging out the last word.

"Oh, I'm sorry Malfoy," he retorted sarcastically but good-naturedly. "I didn't realise we had agreed to meet."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "We didn't, idiot. But I want to go down there. There's an excellent book by Bruce the Barbarian that I want to use for my defence essay."

"And you thought you'd just wait here in case I happened to come by this way?" asked Harry, walking into the bathroom.

Malfoy picked up his bag from the corridor floor and came in after him, while he opened the sink.

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"I guessed you would be coming down here today, given that the library is full. I certainly don't make it a habit to wait in lonely corridors for pesky Gryffindors if I don't think that any are going to happen by."

"Right, well. After you." Harry bowed graciously, and Malfoy rolled his eyes before stepping in to the gaping black hole. Lighting his wand, Harry followed and heard the stone slide back into place behind them.

They spent the morning doing their respective assignments, making use of the myriad of books that the Chamber Library held. After a brief exit from the chamber when Harry left to get them both some lunch, he managed to finally finish most of his work, and decided to do the rest the following week.

He walked around the room a few times, working the kinks out of his neck and waiting for Malfoy to finish up whatever he was doing. When he had, Harry made a suggestion. "Want to practice some Occlumency? It's been about a week and I want to keep on top of it."

Malfoy yawned, stretching. "Alright, come and sit down then. Severus says I'm improving according to his expectations, and since his expectations are usually higher than most, I'm guessing that's a good thing."

Harry took a seat in their usual practice spot; the lounge. They sat cross-legged, facing each other and both took a moment to clear their minds. After a few minutes, Malfoy took his wand and pointed it at Harry, muttering the incantation.

At once, Harry felt Malfoy's presence in his mind, falling rapidly through the impenetrable darkness. He had banished Malfoy from his mind once, out of will power, but had not yet succeeded in doing so with Snape. That was why practising with Malfoy was good; as Malfoy improved, so did he, and they both continued to pose a challenge without either being much better than the other.

After a while of Harry trying fruitlessly to expel Malfoy, and Malfoy struggling but not getting any closer to Harry's memories, Harry decided to try the way he had last practiced with Snape. The way they were going, he was only feeling more and more mentally drained.

Keeping the space around them dark, he imagined he was facing Malfoy. Malfoy immediately took off into the dark, but Harry shot a curse at him and he was forced to turn and duel instead. Malfoy already knew Occlumency, so his was mentally stronger than Harry, but not by much. This made duelling Malfoy much easier than duelling Snape in his mind. It was quite similar to duelling in real life.

After a while, Malfoy gained the upper hand and shot a binding curse at Harry. His wand fell to the ground as Malfoy ran off in to the darkness, which really wasn't so dark anymore. Realizing that he was losing control, he struggled to get out of the bindings, but they were too tight and didn't budge at all. Growling in frustration, he stopped struggling and forced himself to think. This was his mind. He should be able to control it. At the moment, he wanted to be out of these ropes. Focussing on the ropes falling away, he found (to his great surprise) that they did so after a second. Whooping with his small victory, he focussed on resurrecting his barriers again, and the darkness once again fell upon his mind.

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Over the afternoon, Malfoy got to his memories a few times and Harry managed to throw the Slytherin from his mind an equal number of times. All in all he was happy, knowing that he was definitely getting better.

In the last hour that they had before dinner, they sat quietly in their own spaces and worked on their animagus transformations, but neither of them had any luck. Harry thought it had been silly to even try, since after the Occlumency he had another headache, and he suspected that Malfoy probably did as well.

oOo

Harry stretched and yawned, waking to dim morning light shining through the dormitory window. He'd had a good sleep last night and was feeling very refreshed. This was the last week before the Easter holidays, and he was looking forward to the break from classes. Like at Christmas, most of the students were going home, a fact which Harry was equally glad about. It meant he would be able to disappear to the Chamber for as long as he wanted, and there would be no one to notice him missing.

Once dressed, he held out his arm for Salazar, who had slithered on to his pillow while he had been packing his books and quills into his bag. Once Salz was curled around his arm beneath his robes, he quietly left the dorm and went down to the common room.

As he was feeling particularly jovial, he decided to wait for Pandora to go down to breakfast. He was actually starting to enjoy her company, despite of persistent state of cheer and tendency to want to be together all the time. Although, he mused, that could just be because she was the only person who was really talking to him.

He didn't have long to wait before Pandora emerged from the 6th year girls' dormitory, pulling her school robes on over a cardigan and pants. "Heya Harry!"

"Hey Pandora. Ready to go to breakfast?"

"Uh huh, just let me grab my bag." She cast her eyes around the common room as she came down the stairs, looking for her bag.

Not paying attention to where she was going, she missed a step and tumbled down the last few.

Harry leapt up from where he was leaning on the arm of a lounge. "Are you alright?" he asked, concerned.

Pandora giggled, embarrassed, as Harry helped her up. "Sorry, Harry. I really am so clumsy sometimes."

He could definitely agree with that. She certainly wasn't the most elegant of people.



Once Pandora had recovered her bag and work things (which were scattered in a three metre wide circle around the table she had been working at the night before), they left the common room and made their way to the Great Hall.

It was already quite full and they took seats about half-way down the table.

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"Have you finished that Defence Essay yet?" asked Harry. Snape had assigned them a three foot essay on defensive tactics that they had been using in their practicals.

"Almost, you?"

"Nah. I've still got a fair bit to go, actually. We still have a week left to finish it, though."

Speaking of Snape, the Potions Master had just walked into the Hall and taken a seat next to McGonagall. With a pang of guilt, Harry remembered the apology he was supposed to be writing. He had sent Remus' off last week with Hedwig, but hadn't even finished writing Snape's yet. Making a mental note to sit down and work on it later, he finished his breakfast and then left with Pandora for Defence.

...

That night, Harry leaned a book against his knees and unfolded a piece of parchment on it. The wrinkled parchment was covered in sentences that had started off quite neatly and gotten steadily messier the further he had gotten. It was his draft apology to Snape, and currently about half of what he had written was crossed out.

Thinking perhaps it would be better to just start with a fresh sheet, he smoothed the piece out to use as a reference and laid another bit of parchment over the top.

Chewing on the end of his quill, he struggled to find the right words to use. It was no easier than his previous attempt, and the new bit of parchment ended up looking much the same as the first. Still, he thought he had done a bit better and decided to give up on that for the night.

oOo

The week flew by in a mad rush to complete assignments before the Easter break, and soon it was the Friday night before the students left for the Easter Holidays, the tables in the Great Hall heavily laden with all sorts of delicious foods for the Easter Feast. Harry sat down next to Pandora and waited for Dumbledore's usual pre-feast speech. After what seemed ages where the delectable scent of roast lamb and gravy wafted over him, Dumbledore finally stood and clapped his hands for silence.

Quiet descended upon the hall and Dumbledore spoke. "I can see you are all dying to get into the feast, and so am I. So, Happy Easter to you all, and I wish you all a happy holiday."

As soon as Dumbledore resumed his seat, there was a scrambling for serving spoons and dishes.

Harry piled his plate high with lamb, potatoes and carrots, covering it all with a generous serving of gravy.

He ate his way steadily through the meal, listening to Pandora chatter the whole while.

After a while the tables cleared, and students were left to talk for a few minutes until dessert.

Seizing the opportunity, Harry stood and stepped over the bench.

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"I'll be back. Just need the bathroom."

Pandora nodded and Harry walked away, exiting the Great Hall. Aware that he may be being followed, he made his way to the nearest boys' toilets and locked himself in a stall. Pulling the Pendant from beneath his robes, he closed his eyes and focussed on the tunnel that led from the Chamber to Snape's quarters.

When he opened his eyes, he was standing right in front of the waterfall.

He was hoping Snape's wards were only triggered by people entering through the door from the dungeon corridor, and he suspected this was the case. Snape certainly hadn't been alerted when he and Malfoy had come through the waterfall painting.

Pulling his invisibility cloak over himself, he stepped in to the waterfall and straight through to the other side in Snape's quarters. It was absolutely silent, and the sound of his breathing was abnormally loud.

Reminding himself that he had to be quick, he strode over to the door that he remembered went in to the study.

He was reaching out to grab the handle when he had a sudden thought. What if Snape had wards on his study as well? Chewing on his lip, he considered his options. He could use the Pendant and apparate directly in to the study, and hope apparating didn't trigger Snape's wards, or he could try the door and hope that didn't.

He knew the House Elves could apparate within Hogwarts, but would Snape guard against them? If he did, was his kind of apparition using the Pendant the same? He thought Snape probably did ward against apparition, but maybe he only warded against apparating in to or out of the living space, not within it. Harry thought it was highly likely that Snape would also ward the door of the study, and remembering that he had to be as quick as possible, he decided on apparating.

Seconds later, he was standing beside Snape's desk, the Pendant warm against his skin. He quickly scanned the desk, remembering that that was where it had been last time. Not finding it, he turned to the book cases and went to the one that held Defence books.

He spotted the book easily, pulling it out from between two thick, leather-bound volumes on a shelf that sat at eye-level. Tucking it in to a pocket of his robes, he moved quickly and quietly back in to Snape's lounge room and through the waterfall. As soon as he was through and in to the tunnel, he stowed the book in a cleft in the wall and apparated back to the toilet he had locked himself in.

Straightening his robes, he flushed the toilet and made his way back to the Great Hall. As he walked over to the Gryffindor table, he noted out of the corner of his eye Snape's absence. Deciding it probably wasn't a coincidence and that Snape did ward against apparition, he happily took his seat again, knowing that he had an iron-clad alibi.

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Five minutes later, Snape strode into the Great Hall, his robes billowing and a dark scowl planted firmly on his sallow face. Harry smirked into his soup as Snape approached the Head Table, bypassing his seat and going straight to Dumbledore.

Other students had noticed, and Harry could see students looking on curiously as Snape bent to whisper in Dumbledore's ear.

Thinking it would be silly to look disinterested, he followed the lead of other students and happily turned to view the event unfolding at the Head Table, particularly enjoying the small frown that appeared on Dumbledore's face.

He pasted what he hoped was a confused and curious expression on his face. "What do you reckon is going on?" he asked the table at large.

"No idea..." murmured Pandora, frowning slightly.

Dumbledore stood and followed Snape, who was sweeping from the Great Hall. Heads turned to follow them, and Harry allowed himself to feel a bit nervous. After all, Snape seemed like a very private person, and probably knew a multitude of spells with which to protect his

things. What if he had left some trail, or evidence linking him to the crime?

Mentally laughing at the idea of Snape peering through a magnifying glass at a set of muddy footprints and dusting for prints, he tried to calm the queasy feeling in his stomach. Even when he had been in Snape's quarters he had been calm, but now his heart had begun to beat faster.

Telling himself he was being silly, he took a sip of cool water and took several deep breaths, before helping himself to a mouth-watering treacle tart.

...

That night after dinner, Harry was sitting in a corner of the common room finishing up some homework when a shadow fell across him. Looking up, he saw Hermione standing before him, ringing her hands and chewing on her bottom lip.

Harry raised an eyebrow, crossing his arms across his chest. "Something you wanted, Hermione?"

Hermione tossed her head, calming her hands and taking a deep breath. "Yes. Yes there is. Harry, I want this stupid fight to end. It's been going on far too long."

"Really? Do you think?" Harry went back to making notes.

Hermione ignored his sarcastic tone and continued.

"I hate not talking, Harry. We've had arguments before, but we always make up. I just want to do that so we can go back to being friends."

"I thought we were friends before too, but you and Ron didn't really show me much support in the end."

-

“Well it was a horrible thing you did!” she exclaimed. “Calling me that horrible name. I know you didn’t really mean it, Harry. I think you offended Ron more than me, but even so, it wasn’t nice.”

“That was after the fact, Hermione. You and Ron both should have stuck by me when I wanted to use Parseltongue, but instead you sided with everyone else!”

“But Harry, those spells you were using were horrible!”

“They weren’t that bad. Most of them were similar to ones we’ve learned in school.”

“You weren’t on the receiving end!” hissed Hermione, becoming frazzled.

Harry looked up again as Hermione continued. “That one you did to me was absolutely horrid, and sending those spiders at Ron – you know he’s scared of them!”

“That was kind of the point Hermione.”

She looked like she was going to keep arguing, but finally she heaved a sigh and sat down beside him. “Look, maybe Ron and I should have stuck up for you more, but we aren’t entirely at fault. You have to admit you weren’t exactly nice. Anyway, I’m sorry alright? I just hate fighting. We’ve been best friends since first year, and I just want to be like that again. Will you come and see us off tomorrow?”

Harry blinked at the sudden change in topic. Well, it wasn’t really; it was clearly an offer to re-establish their friendship. He was still annoyed at the pair of them, and he was quite sure that Ron didn’t have anything to do with this. On the other hand, he did hate fighting with them. Pandora was alright, but she wasn’t Ron, and Malfoy was okay to hang around with, but he wasn’t Hermione.

Heaving a sigh, he scratched out a sentence on his parchment before replying. “I’ll think about it.”

Hermione gave a small smile and a pat on the shoulder. "Well, I'll leave you to do your work. Let me know if you need any help." With that, she bounced off. Harry watched her join Ron and Ginny in front of the fire, realising that a weight had been lifted of his shoulders.

...

The evening passed slowly; Harry was half expecting Snape to throw open the portrait and haul him out by his ear, but nothing happened and by the time he went to bed he was feeling more relaxed. He was glad he had the Dark Arts book back; it was a victory for his independence.

The next step was getting the Marauder's Map back from Dumbledore. He had already decided to wait a while, knowing that if two things that belonged to him were taken so close together that he would be suspected. He probably would be anyway, but there wasn't really anything he could do about that.

Harry just hoped that Dumbledore didn't carry the map on him, because if that was the case, Harry had no idea how he would get it back.

Before he went to sleep he made sure to spend a while clearing his mind and raising his Occlumency shields.

-

oOo

Not wanting to stress the strained peace that he had developed with Hermione the previous night, he went with Pandora to see her off on Saturday morning. He wished her a good train ride and tried to ignore the scowl on Ron's face as he spoke.

"Well, have a good holiday Hermione... Ron."

"We will, Harry," replied Hermione, giving Ron a disapproving look as he continued to ignore Harry. "You too, okay."

"I will."

Hermione nudged Ron and the redhead finally looked at Harry. "Yeah," he said.

Harry tried not to laugh at his stubbornness. "Say hi to your Mum and Dad for me, will you Ron?"

Ron's scowl deepened, but he gave a jerky nod of his head in response.

A few minutes later, Professor McGonagall called for the students to find carriages, and Hermione and Ron left.

Harry and Pandora watched until the carriages had disappeared from view before returning to the common room.

...

It was just before lunch that a second year approached Harry with a message. He was sitting quietly with Pandora when the small brown-haired boy approached him. "Harry Potter, Dumbledore said to tell you he needs to see you in his office now."

Harry felt a cold stone settle in his belly. There was no doubt that this was about the book. Thanking the kid and standing, he declined Pandora's offer to accompany him and left through the portrait hole. Instead of going straight to the headmaster's office, he instead made his way there and paused in a small dark corridor hidden behind a tapestry near the gargoyle. He took a few minutes to clear his mind and erase any expression of nervousness that might be on his face. He had practiced Occlumency with Malfoy a few times in the past week in preparation for stealing the book, and was quite sure he could keep Snape and Dumbledore out, at least for a fair while. Once his barrier had been erected, he pushed the tapestry aside and walked up to the Gargoyle. He frowned, not knowing the password.

It was not a problem however, as the Gargoyle jumped aside almost immediately. Dumbledore must have been watching the map.



He stepped on to the moving stairs and they took him up to the gold door that opened in to the headmaster's office. Checking his shields, he stepped through, closing the door behind him. Dumbledore was seated behind the desk and Snape was seated in one of the chairs in front of it, a heavy scowl planted firmly on his face.

-

"Sit down, Harry." Dumbledore indicated the remaining chair and Harry sunk into it. As he sat, he noticed the Marauder's Map unfolded on the desk, and realised that must have been how Dumbledore had known he was there.

Snape moved impatiently, and Harry fixed Dumbledore with a questioning look.

"Do you know why you are here Harry?" asked Dumbledore gently.

"Er... no, sir. Has something happened?"

"Indeed it has, my boy. It would seem that last night during the feast someone breached Professor Snape's wards and removed an item kept in his private study. Do you know anything about this?"

"No sir, not at all. I-"

Snape cut him off. "Of course you know about it Potter! I know you had something to do with this!" he spat, his face quite livid. It was the first time he had treated Harry with anything but indifference since the Hogsmeade incident, and was almost a relief.

"I don't know what you mean Professor. I was at the feast, I couldn't have been anywhere near your chambers." "Ha!" yelled Snape. "How do you know where my private office is then, Potter?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "I just assumed, Professor. It wasn't the admission of guilt you're making it out to be."

Dumbledore ignored the exchange. "That is true Severus, Harry was indeed at the feast."

“He left, Albus. He left the feast, as I’m sure you know.”

“Yeah, but I was only gone for about a minute!” Harry said.

“Again, that is true Severus. I have already had an – independent party – confirm that he was only gone two minutes, certainly not enough time to make it down to the dungeons, disable your wards and make off with the object in question.”

“Then he asked someone to do it for him! That elf of his, Dribby or some such. Someone apparated into my quarters, as I have told you Albus. Only house elves can apparate within the school. Of course I don’t think the whelp himself did so!”

“I didn’t ask Dobby to do anything, Professor. I swear.” Harry checked his barriers. It was still intact, and he had not yet felt any presence in his mind.

Dumbledore surveyed him over the top of his half-moon spectacles. “Dobby!” Dumbledore’s voice rumbled around the room making Harry jump slightly, earning him a sneer from Snape. A pop announced Dobby’s arrival.

“What can Dobby do for Master Dumbledore, sir?” At that point, Dobby spotted Harry, and his face split into a wide grin. “And Harry Potter sir! What can Dobby be doing for Harry Potter?” Dobby bowed low and Harry felt a blush crawl up his neck, trying to ignore the venomous look Snape was giving him.

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Dumbledore spoke, asking much the same question he had asked Harry. “Dobby, there is a serious matter I wish to discuss with you. Last night someone broke in to Professor Snape’s quarters and removed an item from his study. Do you know anything about this?”

Dobby shot a somewhat fearful look in Snape’s direction, shaking his head and making his bat ears flap about his head. “No sirs, Dobby is not hearing anything sirs. Dobby is being in the kitchens all night for

the feast. Dobby is cooking, and hears nothing from the other elves about someone stealing things.”

“Nobody asked you to go to Professor Snape’s quarters?” persisted Dumbledore.

Dobby’s eyes widened at the implication. “No sir headmaster Dumbledore sir. Dobby is a good elf. Dobby is never taking things from ‘fessor Snape sir.”

“Very well, Dobby. You may go.”

Dobby apparated out with another crack, and Harry could hear Snape’s furious breathing in the silence that followed.

“I shall ask the other house elves if they know anything. Never fear, Severus, we shall get to the bottom of this. It is indeed a serious worry.”

He turned to Harry. “Is there anything you wish to tell me, Harry, anything at all?”

“No sir. I don’t know anything about anything going missing from Snape’s place.”

“Professor Snape, Harry,” reprimanded Dumbledore sternly, and Harry fought not to roll his eyes. “If that is the case, you may go.”

Harry nodded and stood to go when he felt an ice cold hand grip his forearm tightly. He looked around to see Snape, his teeth bared in an angry growl. “I know you had something to do with this, Potter, and I will not let you get away with it.”

Harry’s arm was released and he stepped away. Nodding to Dumbledore, he left the room without a backward glance.

oOo

On the next day of the holidays Harry slept in, relishing the fact that he had absolutely nothing that he had to do. On top of that, he'd had a peaceful night's sleep.

He jumped out of bed and got dressed. Glancing out the window he saw that it was a perfect day; the sun was shining brightly and a light breeze was rustling the leaves of the trees in the Forbidden Forest. It was a fantastic day for flying, and he decided that he would take his broom out after lunch.

Straight after lunch Harry got his broom and walked down to the Quidditch Pitch. Pandora had opted not to join him, she didn't really like flying. If he'd thought the day had been perfect before, it was nothing compared to now. It didn't surprise him that there were several other students flitting around the pitch, some in pairs but most alone. He took to the air, practising a few technical moves before settling into laps of the pitch with other students.

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On his fourth lap, a flyer pulled up beside him, and he looked over to see Malfoy. "I didn't know you were staying."

Malfoy stuck his nose up, sniffing haughtily. "Didn't ask, did you?"

Harry rolled his eyes in response to the Slytherin's attitude. "Why are you staying here?"

"My father is busy as usual and mother is accompanying him on a business trip."

Harry did a loop on his broom. "Why can't you go, too?"

Malfoy snorted. "They wanted me to come, but as if I want to spend a week of my time traipsing around some dirty foreign city by myself. Father will be in meetings all the time and Mother will be forever shopping and visiting with hundred year old relatives. Not my idea of a good time."

Harry tried hard not to say anything in response. Malfoy didn't know how lucky he was to have hundred year old relatives. Instead, he said, "Up for a trip to Hogsmeade? I want to some Honeydukes stuff for some people."

"Owl for it."

"And I want out get out of the castle for a while. I'm being followed, remember. I want to get away from that for a while."

"I have things I want to do. Why would I bother hanging around with a Gryffindor when I have better things to waste my time on?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "It's a simple question Malfoy, with a yes no answer. Do you want to go or not?"

Malfoy gave an exaggerated sigh. "Fine. I'll go with you if we can go down to the chamber tonight. "

"Agreed. We'll skip dinner and go to Hogsmeade, then get something form the kitchens when we get back. That alright?"

Malfoy shrugged. "I suppose. Shall we take our brooms?"

Harry jumped at the idea, and at 6:00 found himself waiting behind the broom shed for Malfoy, his Dragonfire X held in one hand and a small bag of galleons that he had from selling the basilisk parts in his pocket. He hadn't been waiting long when the crunch of footsteps on gravel announced Malfoy's approach.

They skirted around the edge of the Forbidden Forest, keeping just inside the trees so they wouldn't be seen by anyone wandering the grounds and took the path to Hogsmeade. Once there, they stowed their brooms in an out of the way alley and headed to Honeydukes. Despite his reluctance to go, Malfoy bought a healthy supply of chocolates, and Harry suspected that he had only been whingeing earlier for the sake of it.

Harry himself picked out what he needed and they paid for the lot, earning a suspicious glance from the shopkeeper. Wondering if they should have changed out of their school clothes, Harry asked Malfoy, who just gave a disinterested shrug.

“He doesn’t know our names.” He frowned. “Well, he doesn’t know my name. He might have recognised you. Either way, it’s not like he’ll go out of his way to tell anyone he saw a couple of school students in his shop, is it?”

“Guess not,” replied Harry.

They made a quick stop at the Hog’s Head where Malfoy bought a bottle of Firewhisky. (“For Easter, Potter. If you’re nice to me I might share it with you.”)

After that, they found their brooms and raced back to the school, getting back just two hours after they had left. They agreed to meet in Myrtle’s bathroom, and Harry took his broom up to his dormitory before stopping by the kitchens to get some food. Malfoy had also decided to get something on the way, and they each got what they wanted before carrying their plates down to the chamber.

Malfoy immediately immersed himself in a potions text while Harry took Salazar to the tunnel from the bathroom to look for mice. The Chamber itself was clean and did not harbour any mice, but the tunnels here did.

As soon as he had told Salazar they were going to get some food, he had started up his usual stream of words that never failed to make Harry feel slightly ill. (“Yummyyy jiucccy micccey micccey. Juiccy squishy squiezzzy mousssiessss.”)

Salz had grown a lot in the last few months and was now longer than Harry’s arm. Despite the fact that he had grown, the snake still seemed like a playful child sometimes. He curled around Harry’s shoulder and neck, his tongue lightly flicking at Harry’s ear.

“You know Salz, I don’t know what I would have done this year without you. You’re a good friend.”

“I’sss glad to be your friend Harryyy. You are a good massster.”

After an hour, Harry returned to the library with a satiated Salazar to find Malfoy still reading. When Malfoy saw him however, the Slytherin closed the book and stood. “Where’d you go?”

“I had to feed Salz.”

“Oh. Well, want to practice the animagus transformation?”

Harry had been looking forward to it actually. He had practiced once or twice on his own, but still hadn’t gotten anywhere.

He deposited Salz on her branch and took a seat at one end of the lounge, closing his eyes and clearing his mind. He heard Malfoy settling himself a distance away as he focussed on how he thought it would feel to change.

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Harry was roused from his state of concentration by strange noises coming from the spot where Malfoy was seated. Opening his eyes and blinking blearily, he saw the Slytherin shaking his head from side to side.

“Potter... Potter!”

“What?” Harry stood at the same time as Malfoy and walked over.

“I felt something – on my face. Do you see something?”

Harry walked faster, and when he got close enough to see Malfoy’s face in the dim firelight he gasped loudly.

“What? What is it?” asked Malfoy, his voice demanding.

Harry stared open mouthed at Malfoy's face. He had definitely had some success.

"Well, we know you're doing it right at least."

"Aagh! Just tell me, Potter! I can't take the suspense!" he crowed, impatient and excited.

Harry let out a chuckle. "Well, you might be right about being a dragon."

"Yes! I knew it, and I told you and you didn't believe me!" yelled Malfoy, pointing a slender finger in Harry's face. "Tell me what I look like!"

Harry smirked at his impatience, but relented. "You look kind of reptilian, just around the eyes."

Harry could see ridges where Malfoy's eyebrows had been, and smooth, pale orange scales covered his face just around his eyes, morphing into normal skin a few inches around the perimeter of his eyes.

"Conjure a mirror and see for yourself. It looks pretty cool." Harry was more than a little jealous that Malfoy had beat him to being the first to have a transformation, and even more jealous that Malfoy might actually be a dragon. He had to admit, he thought that was a pretty cool animal, and he wouldn't mind being one himself. It would be just his luck and he would end up being a slug or something.

Instead of conjuring one, Malfoy walked over to the mantel above the fire and took down a small mirrored box that sat atop it, bringing it to face level.

"Excellent!" breathed Malfoy, reaching up to run a finger along the ridge of scales over his eyes and around the sides.

Suddenly, he leaned closer, then leaned down towards the fire for more light. "My eyes! Look at my eyes!"



“What about them?” asked Harry, coming forward to look.

Malfoy turned towards them, an exultant grin on his face. “They’re orange!”

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Harry peered closely, seeing that Draco’s eyes, normally so pale blue they looked silver, were indeed orange, a bright burning orange, the pupils black slits like those that all reptiles had.

Growing even more jealous by the second, Harry huffed and crossed his arms as Malfoy turned back to inspect himself in the mirrored box.

“What does it feel like?” he asked.

“It feels normal,” replied Malfoy. “No different at all.”

“What about when you changed? What did that feel like?”

Malfoy gave a small frown, and Harry waited impatiently (for about two seconds) while Malfoy struggled for the words.

“It felt weird... needless to say that, really. At first it was kind of a burning sensation, not painful or hot. It sort of started to tingle, an itch, but not one you need to scratch. I could feel my skin stretching, but it didn’t hurt at all. Hard to explain, really.”

“Hm.” Harry sat back down, his back to the dwindling fire, and focussed his mind again. He was determined to achieve a transformation of some sort now that Malfoy had beaten him to it, even if it was a small one. A half hour later however, he had only acquired a headache, so gave up until another day.

Looking around, he saw that Malfoy was seated in a chair by the fire, reading the transfiguration textbook and still with scales around his orange eyes. Harry narrowed his eyes when Malfoy shot him a gloating and self-satisfied smirk, aggravating Harry no end.

Getting up and gathering his wand, he turned to Malfoy. “You’d best work on changing back to your normal self. I don’t think it would be a

good idea to go walking around the castle like that. You'll probably scare the first years."

Malfoy had conjured a small mirror and was admiring himself. "I do look scary, don't I." He sighed. "I do suppose you're right, however. McGonagall would have a heart attack if she saw me." Malfoy smirked at the thought, but then lowered the mirror and closed his eyes. Harry watched as Malfoy sat silently for a few moments. A minute later, the Slytherin cracked an eye open.

"Anything?"

Harry shook his head. "Nope, still very reptilian."

Malfoy closed his eyes again, screwing them tightly together. After a second, he relaxed his face and leaned back against the headrest. This time, as Harry watched, the scales around Malfoy's eyes slowly morphed, and before he knew it, they were replaced with Malfoy's usual pale skin. When the Slytherin opened his eyes, they were back to the silver-grey in the dim light.

At Malfoy's questioning look, Harry nodded and stood, stretching. "Well, I'm off. See you tomorrow."

Malfoy nodded and closed his book, also standing. They walked together through the passage way that led to the house common rooms. When they reached the point where the passage split, Harry -

waited until the sound of Malfoy's steps had faded before following the Slytherin. At the next junction, he took the passage that led to Snape's chambers, though he did not go through the waterfall. Instead, he walked over to a cleft in the rock and took the book down, running his hands over the cover and smiling.

oOo

The next day, Harry made his way up to the Owlery, several packages clasped in his arms and letters tucked under his arm.

As soon as he walked through the door Hedwig hooted and flew down, taking a precarious perch on his shoulder.

Putting down the packages, he patted her and fed her an owl treat while he tied two scrolls to her legs.

The first letter he posted was the apology to Snape, and a letter to Remus. He had held on to Snape's letter for several days since he had finished, and knew that if he held on to it any longer that he would never send it. He resented that he was apologising to the man, but he knew that Snape deserved it. He smirked at the thought that Snape would be receiving a missive from him on Easter morning. With Hedwig on her way to Remus, and then back here to Snape, he turned to the pile of packages that were stacked on a shelf. Calling one of the school barn owls down from the rafters, he tied a parcel to it. It took several owls, but eventually he had the Weasleys and Hermione sorted. He had sent a few Honeydukes products to the twins, Ginny, and Ron, as well as short notes. He had written a longer not to Mr. And Mrs. Weasley, along with a small gift. The note he had written to Ron had been a bit strained, sounding too friendly at first. In the end he settled for a simple 'have a good holiday, see you next term' sort of letter. He had also sent some Honeydukes chocolate to Hermione.

oOo

Two days later, Hedwig arrived back. Harry was eating breakfast with Pandora when he saw her fly through the Great Hall. As it was holidays, there weren't as many students as usual, though there were more than at Christmas. All the students sat at one long house table, nearly filling it when they were all there, and the teachers still sat at the Head Table. Harry watched with interest as Hedwig ignored him and flew up to the Head table and straight to Snape. Harry smirked when Snape started and knocked over his goblet of pumpkin juice.

Harry barely contained his laugh as Snape absent-mindedly pet Hedwig, offering her a piece of bacon while he untied the scroll from her leg. His expression changed immediately and his eyes narrowed at Hedwig when he unrolled the letter. Harry though he must

recognise the handwriting, though he had tried his best to be neater than usual.

Harry averted his eyes as Snape's eyes flickered towards him, and then back to the letter. Harry only hoped the letter was to Snape's satisfaction. He had done his best to make it sound both formal and sincere, and knew it really didn't sound like him at all.

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Professor Snape,

I would like to apologise for my actions in Hogsmeade the other week. I acted foolishly and in doing so endangered not only myself, but you as well.

I realise now that that was not the only consequences of my decisions, and apologise for the course of action you were forced to take in order to rectify the situation.

It has taught me that I need to take more responsibility for my actions and think about how they will affect others.

I hope that you can forgive me for my misdeed.

Sincerely and with remorse,

Harry James Potter.

He had felt silly writing the words, but he felt better now that he had sent it. Looking up out of the corner of his eye, he saw Snape sitting with his usual acerbic look and the letter gone. Whether he had pocketed it or incinerated it, Harry had no idea.

oOo

The next day Harry woke, much to his surprise to find a small pile of letters and Honeydukes chocolates at the end of his bed. Grinning, he threw back the covers and sorted through the pile. He wasn't surprised to find a letter and slab of Newt Nougat chocolate from

Hermione. He was surprised to find a brief note from Ron attached to a medium sized box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans. Choosing one, he ate it as he perused Ron's letter, which sounded very much like the one he himself had written for Ron. The small khaki bean turned out to be vomit flavoured, one he had never had the experience of tasting before, and hoped not to ever again. Washing his mouth out with a glass of water, he smiled at the small pile. There was also various kinds of chocolate from Hagrid, Lupin, Pandora, Fred and George, and Mr. And Mrs. Weasley.

Avoiding the lollies from Fred and George, Harry stuffed a few chocolate galleons into his pocket and went down to the common room.

"Heya Harry!" shouted Pandora. "Thanks for the Honeydukes!"

"No problem, thanks to you too. What do you want to do today?"

"I'm easy. I was thinking it would be good to just pig out on chocolate all day."

Harry quite agreed, and they spent most of the day playing exploding snap and chess, pausing only to go and raid their stashes of chocolate.

The only thing that marred the otherwise good day was that Harry had an Occlumency lesson with Snape. He was a bit worried, and rightly so; Snape spent the entire time viciously trying to drag up memories of the textbook, but Harry managed to keep anything incriminating away from Snape's -

grasp. When Snape finally gave up, Harry was extremely thankful. He didn't think he could have held out for much longer.

As he was leaving Snape's office, he had a sudden thought. Quickly ducking down a side passage, he pulled on his invisibility cloak, which he had been keeping in his pocket for cases when he felt the need to slip away from anyone who might be following him. Standing silently, he waited a few minutes and then crept off silently, being very careful not to make any noise.

Eventually he came to the entrance to the Slytherin Common room. He was about to hiss 'open' when another little voice did it for him. Smiling at Salazar, he pushed open the portrait and walked in to the dark room. The fire was roaring, but it hardly lit the room outside of the small ring of armchairs that surrounded it, and the chairs cast long shadows on the rest of the room. He had expected to find people in there, but it was completely empty. Huffing that he would have to search for Malfoy, he looked around and saw stairs leading upwards like in Gryffindor Tower. He went to the top where the balcony held several doors and an open archway revealing stone steps. Keeping in mind that Malfoy lived in a tower, he chose the archway and started up the stone steps. He passed a number of doors on his way up, all of them bearing names and title, such as 'Seventh Year Prefect' and the like.

Finally, he found Malfoy's door, right at the very top of the stairs. Hoping he hadn't climbed the considerably long stairs for no reason, he knocked loudly. He waited a moment, hearing nothing, so he knocked again. This time, he heard three brisk footsteps and the door was flung open.

"What!" yelled a harried looking Malfoy. The Slytherin frowned seeing no one there.

Remembering he was wearing the invisibility cloak, he pulled it off. To his disappointment, Malfoy didn't so much as flinch. "Potter. I really do find it troubling that you can get in here any time you want."

Harry grinned. "Really? I find it exceptionally satisfying."

Malfoy scowled. Suddenly, there were voices on the stairwell below them, and Harry made to pull his cloak on. Malfoy however, reached forward and grabbed his robe, pulling him in to the room before quietly shutting the door and putting a finger to his lips to indicate that he wanted Harry to be quiet.

Nodding, Harry looked around the room. It was smaller than it had looked from the painting on the wall, but was still an excellent size for just one person. Harry was extremely jealous.

A knock sounded at Malfoy's door. The Slytherin ignored it completely and took a seat in an armchair that sat by the fire, indicating at a smaller, and significantly less comfortable wooden desk chair for Harry to sit. Taking out his wand, he transfigured the chair, making it look much more like Malfoy's, and dragged it over to the fire.

After a minute of knocking, the voices finally went away and Harry saw Malfoy let out a deep breath, rubbing his hand over his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Bad day?" asked Harry.

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"You can't imagine how stressful it is to be a prefect, Potter. The bloody fourth years are all up in arms about some ridiculous thing, they've been fighting all day. Apart from trying to sort that out, and having no luck I might add, I've got everyone else coming up to me and complaining how they can't concentrate or relax with the fourth years fighting continuously."

"Ah, well. You have my pity," said Harry, not really feeling all that sorry at all.

Malfoy seemed to sense this and gave a half-hearted sneer.

"I thought we could practice the animagus transformation for a while. Want to go to the chamber? We can go through the common room so we don't have to walk all the way through the castle to Myrtle's bathroom."

"Mmm, I do, but let's just stay here. I'm too tired to go walking."

They spent an hour of the evening working on their animagus transformations, Harry determined to have some change, but he was again disappointed. Malfoy didn't manage to get any further either, but he did get much faster at changing back and forth between what he had achieved so far, taking great pleasure in doing it every time

Harry looked at him. He appeared to be regaining his usual cocky demeanour more each time Harry scowled at him.

After a while, Harry gave up.

“Do you want to play chess?” asked Malfoy, standing up and walking to the mantle above the fireplace. He still had scales around his orange eyes.

“Just so you can gloat about beating me at something else?” grumbled Harry.

“You guessed it, Potter. I’m white.”

“You’re white every time we play. Why can’t I go first?” he whined.

“Potter, we’ve only played about three times.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that you are white every time.”

Malfoy ignored him and refused to give Harry white. He took down a miniature chess board from the mantel. It was small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. It sat atop a stand, and Malfoy put the little table and board on the floor. Confused, Harry watched as Malfoy pulled out his wand, enlarging the table and board until it sat between them at the perfect height to play.

Harry was making his second move when Malfoy suddenly jumped up. “Oh, I forgot!”

The Slytherin stalked over to an elegant wardrobe that sat along one wall and opened the door. Harry raised his eyebrows at what he saw inside. While from the outside the wardrobe looked no deeper than a foot and no wider than two, it was clearly much bigger than that. It was a full size walk in robe.

Shaking his head at the expensive things Malfoy owned, he concentrated on making his move.

Malfoy came back, and Harry looked up at the sound of clinking glass.



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"Told you I'd share," said Malfoy, holding out the bottle of firewhisky he had bought in Hogsmeade and placing two glasses next to the board.

The evening got considerably better after that, and Harry didn't even care when he lost the fourth straight game in a row.

oOo

It was the last day of the Easter holidays, and Harry was actually looking forward to the other students coming back, especially Ron and Hermione. He hadn't really realised how lonely he had been the past few months when he'd been fighting with his friends until he had received the gifts from Ron and Hermione, and was looking forward to life going back to normal. Something that had already gone back to normal was Snape's treatment of him. Since he had sent the apology, he had noticed that Snape no longer completely ignored him. Instead, he was back to being snarky and spitting cruel and sarcastic comments. Though they had been getting along slightly better than this previous to Harry's outing to Hogsmeade, he felt that this attitude was better than indifference.

oOo

Next update in about a week. I PROMISE. : )

Thanks to reviewers : )

Roxoan: Thanks for reviewing. Hope you liked this chapter.

fufu.a.k.: Yay thankyou! Sorry it took me so long to update. I'm hoping it won't take so long again.

Crius: Thanks for reviewing again and again. : ) Guess what!? You're the 100th review! Yay!

Draconicflare: thanks for reviewing.

Yrstrysks: hehe thanks for reviewing. : )

Kaeim: Hi! As usual, thanks for reviewing. Well, Harry isn't going to join Voldemort, and I don't know how good I'd be at writing a Dark!Harry. We'll see...

The Lady Snape: No, I don't think he will, but who knows, I could change my mind : )

Vanessa riddle: Thanks for reviewing. I know this one took ages to get out, but i've been so busy. Please forgive me!

Jensindenial3516: Hehe, don't worry. It'll happen soon...

Thales85: Hi! Thanks for reviewing. Glad you finding it interesting, hopefully it stays that way! : )

Fhippogriff: Missed ya! Thanks for reviewing both chapters : ) No, Snape isn't compromised. He's smart, took care of the problem. Malfoy could probably get into the chamber if he really thought -

about it, but since he goes down there with Harry fairly often he hasn't really needed to find a way. He could get in through Snape's room.

Harry rukes: that's what i like to hear!

Ciroth: Great! Thanks for reviewing : )

TonksFan693: I'm not really sure what kind of snakes England has, so I guess he can be whatever kind of snake you want... Thanks for reviewing!

WolfbainKohaku: hehe yeah I hate the perpetually happy Dumbledore and sudden friendships between H and D. Just not believable. Sorry about the him/her thing with Salazar. It really annoys me when I read other ppl's fics and they've done that, so I really try not to. I'll be more careful from now on. Salz is a boy.

In answer to your last question: he'll find out soon, I'd say. Thanks for the good long review : )

## Return

On Tuesday night the students who had gone home for the week returned on the Hogwarts Express. Harry allowed Pandora to drag him to the Entrance Hall to greet Ron and Hermione.

As soon as she saw them, Hermione flung herself at him, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck. "Harry! Thank you so much for the chocolate, it was my favourite flavour. How was your break? I wish I could have stayed, but you know I haven't seen my parents since last September. I'm so glad we're over this stupid argument, I've missed you so much these last few months."

Harry pried Hermione off his shoulder, patting her shoulder awkwardly as she wiped a stray tear from her eye.

Ron, who looked slightly embarrassed by her behaviour, settled for giving Harry a weak handshake and a nod, though Harry noticed his lips were pursed and he had a feeling that Ron wasn't completely over their argument. He wondered if the gift he had received from Ron was the result of needling on Hermione's part or his parents'.

They went into the Great Hall and took seats at the Gryffindor Table, where Hermione proceeded to tell them, in great detail, about her holiday at home with her parents.

By the time she had reached day three dinner was served, and Harry dished himself up a large bowl of lamb stew.

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After dinner, Harry pulled Hermione and Ron aside, with an apology to Pandora. "We need to talk, guys."

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look, but followed him over to cushions in the corner of the room. "I think I can guess what you want to talk about, Harry."

"Well we can't just go back to being friends as if nothing has happened. I want to, really I do. I've missed you guys, but I need to

know that you both are going to support my decisions. I'm a Parseltongue, you guys know that. I'm not evil, and neither is Parseltongue."

"I know that, Harry," assured Hermione.

"Yeah? Well what about you, Ron? Do you think Parseltongue is evil?"

Ron scowled slightly, looking uneasy. "Well... no I 'spose not," he finally admitted. "But it was right scary, some of those spells."

Harry shrugged. "Not much different really from some of the spells we've learned in classes. You just think they're worse because you don't know how to stop them."

"That's true Harry, but you weren't on the receiving end of some of them. Some of them really seemed... dark. I just think you should be careful, that's all."

Harry sighed. "Hermione, Ron, I am not going to turn dark, not for anything."

"We know that, mate."

"And another thing, I don't want you guys taking things from my trunk for Dumbledore." He gave a pointed glare at Ron. "I can't believe you did that."

Ron looked sheepish. "C'mon, Harry. What was I supposed to do? Dumbledore asked me to. I couldn't say no. Plus, I was pretty pissed at you for that spider thing. You know I hate spiders."

"Well you were being a bit of a bastard," replied Harry in a light tone, and Ron smiled weakly.

"Harry, Dumbledore is just looking out for you," said Hermione.

"Yeah well he's got people following me. Tonks apparently, and Owens. He's another Auror."

Hermione and Ron looked at each other guiltily, and Harry threw his hands up. "You knew!? Great. Well, anything else you two know that maybe I should?" he asked sarcastically.

Hermione placed a hand on his arm. "Please Harry, we didn't know at first, but we kind of worked it out. After that, Dumbledore told us not to tell you. We wanted to, really, but Dumbledore said it was to protect you, and we thought it was a good idea, what with you going off alone all the time.

"It isn't to protect me. Hermione, you know as well as I that Hogwarts is the safest place in England. Nothing's going to happen to me in the castle."

"Look mate, that might be true, and it might not. I mean, you've got to look at the facts. First year there was all that rubbish with the Philosopher's stone, then in second year it was the Chamber of Secrets. Third year it was S... that rat, and fourth year it was the Tournament. Last year we got lured out of the castle. It wasn't difficult for him to convince me that you needed watching. I was angry, but I didn't want You-Know-Who snatching you."

Harry had to concede the point that he had come across trouble at the school, and he could appreciate Dumbledore's manipulating them, because he had put up with years of it.

"Look, let's just forget it all. I expect you guys to tell me though, if you find anything out that I should know, alright?"

"Sure thing, mate," replied Ron.

"We will, Harry. I'm so glad everything is going back to normal. These past few months were terrible. I've been so upset, and Ron's been in an absolutely foul mood."

"I have not!"

"Oh, you have too!" teased Hermione. "Sulking about the pace all the time."

Harry laughed and waved Pandora over, and the four of them spent the evening talking and laughing.

oOo

Over the next few days he noticed that with the repaired friendship between himself and Ron and Hermione, the rest of the Gryffindors had returned to treating him as they always had as well.

He was a bit put out by this, but he wasn't going to complain. As long as people let him act how he wanted and didn't get offended by it, then he was happy to have them all as his friends.

oOo

On the first Thursday back at school Harry was alone in the chamber. It was late, and he had been sitting in the same spot for over an hour now trying to achieve an animagus transformation. He was about to give up for the night when all of a sudden, he felt the oddest sensation in and around his mouth. It started in the space between his nose and mouth, and somewhere above his chin, then radiated inwards around his mouth. His eyes snapped open and he jumped up, a hand going to his mouth.

He was walking quickly to the mantel to get the mirrored box when the sensation stopped as suddenly as it had started. Stretching his jaw and hearing it crack, he reached out and pulled down the mirror, bringing it to his face and scrutinising his appearance, excitement bubbling in his stomach.

His outward appearance was unchanged, causing a small stab of disappointment. That however, was forgotten as soon as he opened his mouth wide and saw a row of razor sharp teeth. He noticed that his mouth opened further than normal, so that the bottom row of inch long teeth jutted out a bit at an odd angle. If he had to describe them, he'd say they looked quite like the teeth of a piranha.

When he closed his mouth, the teeth locked together, forming a solid wall of enamel.

He grinned into the mirror, revealing the interlocked fangs. He looked deadly.

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Harry couldn't wait to show Malfoy the impressive set of chompers he had acquired. It had taken a few tries, but he had managed to return them to normal quite quickly, and was now waiting for an opportunity to show them off.

By the time potions rolled round on Friday, he couldn't wait any longer.

After making sure everyone was thoroughly engrossed in their own potions, Harry concentrated on the transformation, feeling the strange feeling shooting through his gums. When it stopped, he ran his tongue along the back edge of the teeth, feeling the sharp elongated fangs.

"Hey, Malfoy," he whispered, leaning down so that his mouth was hidden from the rest of the class by the steaming cauldron that sat on their desk.

"Hm?" murmured Malfoy, engrossed in chopping their shrivelfig into perfectly equal pieces.

Harry didn't reply, instead opening his mouth in a wide grin.

Malfoy finally looked up, and Harry was quite pleased with the reaction. Malfoy's eyes went wide, and he toppled backwards off his chair, yelling a particularly foul swear word as he did so.

Harry couldn't help but burst out in laughter, clutching his ribs as tears of mirth came to his eyes.

Malfoy pulled himself to his feet, glaring daggers at Harry as their classmates snickered.



“What is going on here?” demanded Snape, striding over and glaring at the students who were laughing.

Struggling to control his own laughter, Harry concentrated desperately on returning his mouth to normal, neglecting to answer Snape.

Relief shot through him when he felt the change take place almost immediately, even as Snape hissed the question again.

“Sorry Professor,” intoned Malfoy smoothly, saving Harry from answering. “Just a little accident, entirely my fault.”

Snape’s expression softened from the look of distaste it had taken on when he had been looking at Harry. “Very well, see that it doesn’t happen again.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“And stop laughing this instant, Potter. I fail to see what is so funny.”

Harry barely managed to get out a reply between his chuckles, and he was desperately in need of a deep breath.

“Enough, Potter!!” said Snape, his voice rising. “Remain behind to discuss your detention.”

That brought Harry’s chuckles to a stop, and he muttered a sullen ‘Yes, sir’ as Snape left to stalk between the work benches again. Trust Snape to give him a detention for next to no reason. But, it had definitely been worth Malfoy’s reaction.

He turned to the Slytherin. “So? What do you think?”

“Quite an impressive set of teeth, really.”

Harry grinned. “I thought so too.”

“You could have given me some warning thought, instead of just gnashing them in my face like that and making me embarrass myself.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I didn’t gnash them in your face, and you didn’t really embarrass yourself.”

“I fell off my chair Potter, in front of the entire class I might add. I consider that embarrassing.”

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After dinner, Harry trudged down to the dungeons for his detention come Occlumency lesson.

As usual, he entered Snape’s office to find the man sitting behind his desk marking essays.

“Take a seat Potter.”

Harry did as he was told and Snape pushed the pile of essays to the side, fixing Harry with a less than friendly stare. “Well Potter, let’s see if you’ve made any improvement. Legilimens.”

The lesson began the same way they all had lately. He could now successfully keep Snape away from his thoughts for quite a while, and throw him out occasionally with the duelling method. He still hadn’t succeeded in throwing him out using will power.

An hour later, Snape had only managed to access his thoughts once, and Harry was feeling quite pleased with himself even though he hadn’t managed to throw Snape out even once, a fact which Snape took great pleasure in pointing out. Despite that, Harry knew he was improving, and as long as he was improving he couldn’t complain.

oOo

Acrid smoke filled the air and burned his lungs as he stood in the chaotic street. Sleek black figures moved in the haze, shooting spells

that shattered windows and set fire to buildings not already engulfed in flames. The aged wood burned quickly.

Terrified screams reached his ears, and the corners of his mouth turned up in a smirk. Taking out his wand, he sent an array of sparks in to the air.

As the shower of sparks faded, the popping sounds of apparition could be heard up and down the street. Waving his wand once more, he cried 'Morsmorde' and a ghostly green skull appeared high in the sky, looking down on the devastation caused by his loyal Death Eaters.

Mate! Mate, are you alright? C'mon Harry, wake up!"

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Harry groaned as sunlight assaulted his eyes. His head was killing him, and his muscles felt like they were on fire. On top of the pain, he felt as if he had gotten no sleep, and his eyes drooped heavily as he swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"Harry, are you okay? You were screaming fit to raise the dead!"

Ron leaned closer and spoke quieter. "Nightmare?"

"Vision," Harry grunted in reply.

Ron's eyes went wide. "A vision? Are you sure?"

Harry nodded slowly, but stopped when it made the pounding in his head worse. "Yeah Ron, I'm sure." His scar was killing him, and he put a cool hand over it trying to numb the pain."

"Should I warn McGonagall? The Order would want to know about it."

Harry processed what Ron was saying. He couldn't remember seeing and Order members, but it had been difficult to discern faces in the thick smoke. Still, there could be people still alive. "Yeah... uh, go tell... someone. McGonagall... Dumbledore." Harry waved his arm in the direction of the door.

“Will you be alright?”

“Mmm. Just hurry.”

As Ron rushed from the room, Harry pushed himself up against the wall and closed his eyes.

The momentary silence that had descended when Ron had left was immediately shattered when Hermione came in.

“Harry, are you alright? Ron told me to come in and check on you, and then just rushed out. Has something happened?”

At that point, she must have caught sight of his face, because he heard her let out a small gasp. “Harry, you look awful! Are you ill?”

Harry opened his eyes and focussed on Hermione. “I had a vision.”

Hermione put a hand to her mouth. “Oh no! It’s been ages since you had one of those.”

Harry gave a wry smile. “Not really, actually.”

Hermione looked ashamed for a second. “I’m so sorry, Harry. Ron never mentioned... while we were fighting, you know.”

Harry patted her hand. “Don’t worry about it ‘Mione.”

“I thought the Occlumency was supposed to stop your visions. You’ve been learning it for ages now, and you said you were getting really good at it.”

Harry shrugged. “I am, it just isn’t helping. Snape reckons I need to learn Legilimency, and I can’t learn that until I can control my mind properly with Occlumency.”

Hermione gave him a puzzled look. “But how can Legilimency help you? I thought the point of Occlumency was to block these visions you were having.”

“Well, the thing is-“

“Mr. Potter, are you well?”

Harry looked over to the door where Professor McGonagall had just walked through, followed by Ron.

“I’m alright.”

“Mr. Weasley tells me you have had another vision.”

“Yes Professor. I don’t know where it was. What I could see through the smoke didn’t look familiar at all, so it probably wasn’t Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade.”

“Very well. Professor Dumbledore is currently informing the right people and attempting to find out what has happened. If there was an attack, we didn’t know about it.” She scowled slightly.

“I fairly certain it happened, Professor. It felt real. And my scar hurts.”

“Well, get yourself off to the hospital wing. You certainly don’t look well.” McGonagall gave him a sympathetic look and helped pull him to his feet. Then, with Ron on one side and Hermione on the other, they made their way slowly to the hospital wing.

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“Mr. Potter!” exclaimed Madam Pomfrey when he arrived supported by Ron and Hermione. “You just can’t seem to stay away, can you?”

Harry gave her a small grin as she helped him onto one of the cots.

“Let’s have a look at you then.”

“He’s had one of those awful visions again Madam Pomfrey.”

The matron tisked lightly, pursing her lips as she held a hand to his forehead. “Do you require Professor Snape’s assistance?”

Ron gave a strangled cough which Harry ignored. "No, not this time. Maybe just some pain reliever for my scar."

"Alright, but I'm going to keep you here for a few hours for observation. I don't want you collapsing halfway through dinner because I didn't treat you properly."

Harry groaned and leaned his head back against the pillow. The last thing he wanted was to spend his Saturday lying in bed.

Madam Pomfrey bustled back over a few minutes later with a thick purple potion that made him gag as he swallowed it. It was one he'd had before, but he didn't think he would ever get used to it.

As soon as the matron left to her office, Ron turned to him, hands on hips. "Why did she ask if you needed Snape?" he asked, his lips twisting at the name.

Harry shrugged. "Snape just has some potions that are better for me, more suited than the generic ones Madam Pomfrey has here, that's all." He certainly wasn't going to explain how he sometimes suffered the effects of Voldemort's curses. Besides, that had only happened a few times.

"Hmm, well I'd be careful, mate. I wouldn't trust anything that greasy git gave me."

Hermione rolled her eyes as she returned Harry's amused look. "Ron, how many times are we going to have this discussion? Professor Snape is on our side."

"Doesn't mean he wouldn't try to poison us," mumbled Ron.

Eventually, talk turned back to Harry's visions, and Ron made the same comment that Hermione had in the dormitory earlier.

"I thought learning Occlumency was supposed to help though?" He leaned forward and dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Are you sure Snape's teaching you right?"

Harry laughed. "Yes, Ron, I'm sure. I'm actually pretty good now."

"That's great, Harry," exclaimed Hermione. "But what were you saying before, about learning Legilimency? Why isn't Occlumency helping?"

"Legilimency, what's that?"

"It's kind of the opposite of Occlumency, Ron. It's all about getting into someone else's mind instead of keeping someone out of yours."

Ron looked puzzled. "So why do you need that instead of Occlumency?"

"I'm not a seer, guys. They aren't visions, as such. I see things as they're happening, through his eyes. I'm in his head. That's why the Occlumency isn't working. I mean, he isn't likely to be putting his thoughts and feelings into me, is he?"

Ron shivered as Harry continued. "He'd have to be insane to let me see these things. If it was like that, then the Occlumency would probably work, but it's me that's getting in to his mind and that's why I need to learn Legilimency. I need to learn to stop my mind from well, wandering, so to speak."

"Ooh, but Harry, Legilimency is supposed to be much harder than Occlumency. You can't go on having visions like this."

"I know, but Snape insists that I have to be at least competent in Occlumency first. Luckily I think I'm almost there."

"Well, that's good I suppose," mused Hermione, and Ron nodded his head in agreement.

"But I think you should start learning the basics of Legilimency as soon as possible."

"Yeah, I wish he would just start teaching it to me, even if I don't have the control yet, I will soon."

“Why don’t you just ask him? Have you tried that?”

“Of course not. Snape won’t care if I ask him. Nothing I say can change his mind.”

“Well you won’t know until you try, will you?” pressed Hermione.

“I agree mate, it is worth a shot if it gets rid of these visions sooner.”

Harry sighed. He did want to get rid of them. “I’ll think about it.”

Hermione sat back, looking pleased.

“Hey, where’s Pandora? I thought she’d be here at some point. I think this is the first time she hasn’t been with me outside of classes.”

Hermione and Ron exchanged a fleeting look, but he caught it, narrowing his eyes. “What?”

“Oh, it’s nothing really Harry. She just can’t be here at the moment. Harry raised an eyebrow. “Why, there’s no classes on.”

Ron spoke up. “Madam Pomfrey said you aren’t to have visitors, except for us.”

“When? I didn’t hear her. And that’s ridiculous anyway, I’m fine. In fact, I think we should go.” Harry made to get up. But Hermione laid a hand on his shoulder.

“I think you should just rest for a while, Harry.”

“Oh, come on ‘Mione,” he whined. “I really am fine. That potion did wonders. Plus, I missed breakfast and lunch is starting in about five minutes. Aren’t you hungry Ron?”

Ron looked guiltily at Hermione, who was pursing her lips. “Yeah, I kind of am. I missed breakfast too.”

“It’s settled then, let’s go.”



With that, Harry jumped up, as did Ron. Hermione stood stiffly, glaring between the two of them. Being careful not to alert Madam Pomfrey, and making sure Hermione didn't make any noise, they crept past the matron's office and out of the hospital wing.

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Pandora wasn't at lunch and Harry didn't see her in the common room that afternoon either. Assuming she was getting work done in the library, he put it from his mind. He, Ron, Hermione and Ginny spent the afternoon playing Exploding Snap and then (except for Hermione) a game of three aside Quidditch with some fifth years they found on the Quidditch Pitch.

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Harry had arranged to meet Malfoy after dinner, and he waited for him in Myrtle's bathroom after making a few jumps with the Pendant to throw off anyone following him. He doubted that he needed to however, what with the attack he had seen all the aurors probably had other things to deal with.

Malfoy arrived soon after him and they walked down to the library.

"So are we going to practice the animagus transformation tonight?" asked Harry. Now that he had made the first change, he couldn't wait for the next one.

"Yes, but first I want to finish my Arithmancy essay. It shouldn't take me longer than an hour, I'm nearly done."

"Alright." Harry scanned the shelves as Malfoy settled down to work and was thinking of studying when another idea occurred to him. Heading for the tunnels, he headed to the closest painting that would take him into the world of paint.

The closest was the one next to the doors that led to Dumbledore's chambers and office, and he leapt through in to the landscape in Dumbledore's office, landing on the soft grass with a dull thud. It was

quite empty, and he decided to check at Grimmauld Place. He made a running leap through the barrier, but when he landed he was not in the picture with the barn that he had envisioned. Instead, he was in the painting next to the landscape, Phineas Nigellus' portrait.

Perhaps he couldn't jump between paintings in different buildings, only ones in the castle? Assuming this to be the case, he walked to the door at the back of Phineas' portrait and through to the room with three doors. He took the one to Grimmauld Place and came out into a painting that sat upon the wall of a shadowy hallway.

He again fixed the image of the barn in his mind, and this time when he jumped through the barrier he did come out in the desired painting.

Peering out through the frame, he saw that the meeting had already begun and that the kitchen was fuller than he had ever seen it.

He slowly pulled open the barn door so that it didn't creak, and when it was wide enough for him to slide through he went in to the barn and climbed the ladder up to the loft. Settling on the usual hay bale, he peered out the window and down upon the meeting. The group was currently discussing what seemed to be the previous night's attack.

"What I can't understand," exclaimed a portly young man with a pompous voice, "is how we didn't hear about such a devastating attack. The effort that must have gone in to planning it wasn't small, even if the actual attack group wasn't that big."

Dumbledore answered the man's question. "Alas, Kenneth, we cannot know about every plan of Tom's. We are lucky that we are able to thwart the plans of his that we do. It is unreasonable of us to expect to hear about every one."

Grumbling met this reply, but no one raised any objection to the statement.

A few more comments were made about the damage caused by the attack before Dumbledore dismissed the meeting.

Harry was momentarily disappointed with the meeting, but he noticed that several people had not moved from the table and decided to wait and see if discussion might continue.

He was rewarded when Mad-Eye Moody closed and locked the door again. Still in the room were Moody, Tonks, Dumbledore, the Weasleys, Snape, McGonagall, Shacklebolt, and four others Harry didn't recognise.

Almost immediately, Snape began talking, as if he was answering some unspoken question.

"As I have previously discussed with Albus and Minerva, I believe the Dark Lord suspects a spy. He keeps his secrets ever closer and hesitates to tell even his most loyal the full extent of any of his plans. I heard no mention of this attack from him, and he gave no indication that he was planning anything at all for last night. It is my belief that he suspects a spy."

Concerned muttering broke out in the room, halting Snape's report.

"Severus, does he suspect you?" asked Molly Weasley, concern evident in her voice.

"I think not. However, I believe this attack was an attempt to narrow down the number of potential spies. The group that attacked last night were no more than new recruits and pitiful excuses for pureblood wizards. Given that no one was there to halt the attack, he most likely believes none of that group to be the spy."

"What can we do then? If we wait for you to hear of an attack, you will be one of those singled out when we act on the information. I mean, we can't not act on information of an attack, can we?" asked Arthur Weasley.

"Indeed it would be a difficult decision, but if it allowed us to retain our spy... I see no other option," replied Dumbledore, his voice heavy.

Tonks spoke up from her spot seat next to Molly. "How can we just sit by and let such a tragedy occur again? We can't let innocent people die."

"But how many people are saved with the information Severus brings us, Tonks? Perhaps it would be worth it, much as it pains me to say," replied Arthur.

"Aye, sometimes in war you need to make sacrifices," growled Moody, and Tonks slouched in her seat, a pout on her lips.

"It may not come to that," said Snape, and the occupants of the room turned to him. "I shall keep an eye on more than the members of the inner circle and attempt to glean what I can members of the lower ranks. Perhaps if I can learn of an attack we will be able to make a presence and his suspicion will fall on a group that does not include me."

"I believe that is our only option for the moment," said Dumbledore among murmurs of agreement. "Alastor, Nymphadora and Kingsley, you will of course see what you can find out from any Death Eaters taken into custody?"

Nods answered him and for a few seconds quiet descended in the kitchen. Harry pulled a roll from his pocket that he had stashed there at dinner and tore a chunk of with his teeth.

"Albus," said Molly, "Ron's last letter seemed to indicate that he and Harry have resolved whatever disagreement they were having?"

"Yes Molly, it would seem Harry has returned to eating with his friends. I must admit that dinner is the only times I have seen him lately. Nymphadora?"

"Oh yes, Harry is getting along fine with his friends again. I was quite worried for a while, about the way he was withdrawing so much and escaping alone at all hours of the day and night."

"Well that's good hear," replied Molly.

“Albus, I have given my report and I have essays to mark. If you’ll excuse me.” Snape was clearly disgusted with the conversation, but as he turned to leave Dumbledore stopped him.

“Just a moment Severus, there is still something I wish to discuss with you.” Snape scowled but leaned again on the wall in a dark corner as the discussion continued.

“It is good to see him happier, but he still disappears and I have no idea where he goes. Owens has had no luck either,” said Tonks.

“Still, Nymphadora,” sneered Snape. “Surely two such highly trained Aurors as yourselves should be able to keep track of one teenager, an admittedly dense one nonetheless.”

Tonks scowled at the same time Harry did. “He is not dense, Sev, and he is quite a slippery character. He says he’s just going to the bathroom or something, and I expect Owens to follow him, but then he just doesn’t come back and he’s gone for hours. You can’t expect me to follow him to the bathroom.”

“That may be so, but he is still only a child and you are a skilled Dark Wizard catcher, and yet this boy who has never shown and signs of having an even remotely impressive intellect still eludes you.”

Tonks was becoming exasperated, but Dumbledore was only watching the exchange with a small smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye.

“You don’t understand! He just disappears!”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Well, I daresay young Harry knows a good many secret passageways and such that even his father didn’t.”

Tonks shook her head tiredly. “I thought I knew a good few, but since I’ve been on the job I’ve learned of a few more.”

“Perhaps I could lend you the Map. I have tried to keep a track of Harry’s movements, but really I am far too busy.”

Harry scowled at the reminder that his father's map had been stolen from him, and at the fact that Dumbledore was using to see where he was. It was highly unfair, in his opinion.

"That's an idea, actually," agreed Tonks. "As soon as he leaves I can activate it and follow him that way. He won't be able to disappear on me then."

Harry balled his fists in anger. He didn't need people babysitting him. Nothing was going to happen to him in the castle. Aside from that, he couldn't risk Dumbledore finding out that he was going down to the chamber, or that he was going there with Malfoy.

"If you drop by my office tomorrow, at the usual time for your daily report, I'll have it ready for you then."

Tonks nodded agreement and panic shot through Harry. If Dumbledore gave Tonks the Map he had no chance of getting it back. He knew where Dumbledore's office was and could get in there, but aside from the fact that Tonks was following him, he had no idea where he could find her. She must have quarters somewhere in the castle, unless of course she was flooing out every night. There were too many options to think about regarding Tonks.

There was no other option, he decided. He would have to get the Map back tonight or tomorrow.

Dumbledore clapped his hands merrily. "Well, I think that is all for tonight. It is late and I'm sure you would all like to retire."

McGonagall stood and straightened her skirt. "Very well. I shall see you later, Albus, Severus."

"Minerva," Snape nodded in reply as she passed with Tonks. "Nymphadora."

"Sevvie," replied Tonks, smiling sweetly. Snape narrowed his eyes, and Harry grinned at Tonks' nerve.

Kingsley, Arthur and Molly also bid Snape good evening, but everyone else ignored him as they left the room.

Once the kitchen was empty of all persons but Dumbledore and Snape, Dumbledore flicked his wand and a dusty decanter of brandy popped into existence on the table. "Brandy, Severus?" asked Dumbledore as he poured two glasses. Snape didn't answer, but took the glass Dumbledore floated over to him.

"So, how is our Harry progressing with his Occlumency lessons?"

A sneer twisted Snape's face at Dumbledore's use of the word 'our,' but he answered caused Harry some satisfaction. "He is progressing far better than I expected him to. He is obviously clearing his mind each night. I believe it would be best to start his Legilimency training at the soonest possible opportunity. As soon as he succeeds in throwing me from his mind by will power I will consider him mentally ready to begin."

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. "It is indeed imperative that we close his mind to Voldemort's. I fear the things he sees while he sleeps are not doing him any good."

Snape sneered at Dumbledore's comment, and Harry privately agreed that it was a ridiculous comment to make. Of course the visions weren't doing him any good!

Harry was glad that he didn't have to ask Snape as Hermione had suggested. He felt he was so close to being able to accomplish what Snape wanted.

Conversation turned to matters that had nothing to do with Voldemort or the war and Harry decided it was time to return to the chamber. It hadn't been a bad night of information gathering as far as he was concerned, and Malfoy should be finished his essay by now, meaning they could practice. Jumping through to Phineas' portrait, he took the door to Hogwarts and then jumped through the portrait he had first come through. Stepping out, he took the Pendant out and apparated to where the tunnel left the library, just out of sight of the entrance in case Malfoy happened to be looking.

He entered the library to find Malfoy browsing the shelves.

“Where did you go, Potter?”

“I just had some things to do. Ready?”

Malfoy nodded and settled down in an arm chair. Harry took the chair across from him and proceeded to clear his mind.

Now that he had achieved a transformation, it was much easier to imagine the feeling of changing. Almost as soon as he thought about changing, the fangs grew in. He stretched his jaw, and like last time he heard it crack loudly.

“Quiet, Potter. I’m trying to concentrate here.”

Harry popped open an eyelid and saw Malfoy seated a few metres away, reclined against the base of the lounge. The ridge above and around his eyes was scaled, but Harry couldn’t see the eyes themselves.

Not long had passed when he heard a whoop of triumph from Malfoy, and he groaned in defeat. He had been hoping to beat Malfoy this time around. Climbing to his feet and stretching his aching back, he saw that Malfoy was already over at the mantel above the fire, peering in to the mirrored box with a hand to his head.

“What is it?” asked Harry, coming to stand beside Malfoy. It was a bit difficult speaking with the longer teeth, but he managed, even if his voice did sound a bit strange.

The Slytherin turned and pointed to one side of his head, and then the other. “Do you see them? Horns!” he said gleefully.

Harry leaned closer and peered at where Malfoy was parting the hair on the left side of his head.

“Er...” Harry’s eyes flickered between Malfoy’s face and his ‘horns.’



“Say something! Aren’t they brilliant!”

“Um... yeah, yeah. Nice horns, Malfoy.”

The Slytherin narrowed his eyes. “You’re being sarcastic.”

“No, nooo. I just...”

“Just what?”

“Well, don’t you think you’re getting just a bit over excited? Those are just little twisted... lumps of skin...I mean, they could turn in to anything.”

“Little... twisted... lumps of skin!?”shouted Malfoy. The Slytherin turned away, spluttering incoherently.

Thinking it might be best to diffuse the situation before Malfoy exploded, he hastened to placate him. “Look, they’re great, really. I just didn’t see them very well. Let me have another look.”

Malfoy turned and glared, then stuck his nose in the air. “No.”

“Oh, come on. Let me see. I’m just annoyed you beat me again.”

This time Malfoy smirked slightly. “Really? Annoyed or jealous?”

“I’m not jealous.”

“Hm... don’t believe you.” Malfoy shook his head and tutted mockingly. “Jealousy is a sin, Potter.”

“So is pride.”

“Whatever. So, you were saying, about my horns?”

“Oh yeah.” Harry took another look when Malfoy lowered his head. “Really great. They’re actually bigger than I first thought. Can’t wait to see when they’re fully grown.”

If it had been anyone else, they would have been disgusted with Harry's attempts to sound sincere, but Malfoy, egotistical as he was, lapped up the praise.

"Well, you'll improve soon enough as well. Have you been practicing by yourself?"

"Only a few times. I've been pretty busy with school stuff though."

"Yes, me too. Although it is worth it. And it isn't as if you aren't succeeding; you've got those brilliant teeth."

Harry was surprised at Malfoy's compliment. Taking the mirrored box from Malfoy, he examined them admiringly. He happened to think they were quite brilliant himself. Suddenly he noticed something, and he grinned. His tongue was jet black. "Well that didn't happen last time," he commented, happy that he'd made an improvement, no matter how small.

"What?" asked Malfoy.

"My tongue, it's black. The score is even."

"Hm. So it is," said Malfoy, looking at Harry's tongue when he opened his mouth wide for the Slytherin to see. "You know, Potter, that looks a little creepy. Your mouth opens really wide. It's like your jaw is disconnected or something."

"I know. Cool, eh?"

Malfoy gave a theatrical shudder. "I suppose, but as I said, creepy."

...

An hour later, they were both sitting in front of the fire reading when Harry remembered that he had something to ask Malfoy. Putting down his book, he leaned forward and spoke. "So Malfoy, I have a favour to ask."

Harry wasn't expecting the reaction he got. The Slytherin burst out in laughter.

"A favour?" he crowed. "You want to ask me a favour, Potter? Oh, this is hilarious!"

Harry looked on, dumbfounded as Malfoy struggled to control his outburst.

"Why would I willingly do anything for you?"

Harry narrowed his eyes, angry at Malfoy.

"Because if you don't," he snapped, "I refuse to bring you down here ever again!"

Malfoy's laughter, which had quietened to chuckles, cut off abruptly at Harry's harsh reply, and he was now staring at Harry with something akin to fear on his face.

"No, no Potter! You can't do that!" said Malfoy, his eyes wide. "There's no need to make threats. What do you need?"

Malfoy dragged Harry over to the table, pulled out two chairs and pushed Harry into one, sitting himself down in the other. He clapped his hands once and leaned forward. "Hit me with it."

Harry smirked at the boy's change in attitude and shook his head exasperatedly. "I wasn't threatening you Malfoy. I was stating a fact. Well, what could happen if you don't help me. I mean, I could do it myself, but I'm really not sure I'd be successful."

"Fine, fine, not making a threat, but why? Why wouldn't you be able to bring me down here anymore?"

"The thing is, a couple of weeks ago, Dumbledore confiscated my Map, you know that one I showed you?"

"Yeah yeah, I know the one. Keep going."

“Well you remember how I said I was being followed? He’s also been keeping track of me with the Map.”

“What!” Malfoy jumped to his feet. “What if he saw us together? I told you Potter, it wouldn’t be good for me.”

“I know, I know. I figured that Dumbledore’s a busy guy, he’s not going to be constantly looking at the Map, and even if he did see us together once or twice, he’d just assume we were talking about Potions or Defence.” Harry shrugged and leaned back in his chair, watching the Slytherin pace angrily. “Besides, the Chamber isn’t even on the map.”

“What if he saw us going into the bathroom though? And into the wall? He knows where the entrance to the Chamber is from our second year. He’ll know you’ve been bringing me down here, and he’ll put a stop to it!”

“Don’t you think I’ve thought about this?” snapped Harry, quickly getting cranky. “I’ve been wanting to get the Map back since he took it, but I didn’t think it would be a good idea to steal it back so soon after taking the book from Snape. Then they’d more than suspect me; they’d know it was me. Anyway, you don’t need to worry. He hasn’t seen us coming down here.”

“So what are you going to do about it? It’s only a matter of time before he does. We come down here a couple of times a week, he’s bound to see us eventually!”

Harry sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “This is why I need your help, alright? So can you please just sit down and shut up for once!” he yelled.

Malfoy gave him a foul look, but Harry was fast getting angry at the Slytherin’s behaviour and simply glared until Malfoy threw himself back in his seat, arms crossed moodily.

“Stop sulking and listen to me.”

"I am not sulking, Potter. Just tell me what the plan is to stop the interfering old coot from finding out about the Chamber."

"Right. Well earlier I overheard him telling someone that he was going to give it to them instead, because they have more time and opportunity than him to watch it." He held up a hand to forestall Malfoy, who was muttering angrily. "Sooo, we need to get it back either tonight or tomorrow. Dumbledore said that he would give it to her when she came to give her daily report, so I figure that we have all day, because that will probably be after dinner when Dumbledore retires to his office. Agree?"

Malfoy nodded grumpily, but he was paying attention to what he was saying, for which Harry was grateful.

"I have a plan to get in to Dumbledore's office, but I'm going to need a distraction. I think the best time will be straight after dinner, before she goes to see him."

Malfoy snorted. "Obviously," he spat sarcastically.

Harry glared.

"And who is this 'she' you keep talking about?"

"Oh, Tonks. She's one of the aurors following me."

"Right. One of them? What about the others? How many are there, anyway?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure there are only the two of them, and they only follow me one at a time I should think. That doesn't matter though; I can easily get away from them. What I need you for is to create some distraction to lure Dumbledore out of his office so I can slip in under the cloak and grab the Map."

"What kind of distraction?"

"It has to be something big, obviously, and loud too, because we need Dumbledore to hear it in order for him to leave straight away. I

guess if we do something right outside his office, or just down the corridor maybe.”

Malfoy nodded thoughtfully. “Well, I can do loud. I-“

“I could get some Blasting Bombs from-“

Malfoy spared him a scathing glance. “I am not touching any Weasley products.”

“Oh come on! This is so we can get the Map back, remember. It’s important.”

“And there’s nothing wrong with the Weasleys,” he added.

“Even so,” said Malfoy, ignoring the last part, “there are other ways. As I was saying before you rudely interrupted, I have an idea. I have some Moggrebod hair. I can mix it with some dragon blood – I’m sure Severus has some of that, and if not I’ll go out tonight and get some.” Malfoy paused for a second, thinking. “In fact, I’ll have to go out anyway to get the other ingredient. “

“A Skancy egg,” he added at Harry’s questioning look. “If I mix the Moggrebod hair and the dragon blood, it’ll react with the Skancy egg and create a nice big explosion.

Harry nodded thoughtfully. It seemed a bit radical and dangerous to him, but he supposed the Weasleys must use these sort of things to make their products.

“That’s actually a pretty good idea.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Surely you’ve noticed by now my superior intellect, Potter.” He smirked. “The Weasleys aren’t the only ones who know how to make a bang.”

Harry shook his head at Malfoy’s arrogance. “Hang on; it won’t damage the castle, will it? And we don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Some dung bombs will take care of the students wandering along there. It’s a pretty deserted area of the castle anyway. As for damaging the castle, do you really think I’d be stupid enough to smash up my own home, Potter? Dragon blood causes an explosion when mixed with a lot of things, but with Skancy eggs, the explosion will be quite small. The egg actually exploding will cause heaps of noise, but it won’t be hot. The reaction will be very cold, there might a bit of frozen egg on the walls, but no damage at all. It’s perfect for the purpose.”

Harry was quite impressed with Malfoy’s knowledge and with the plan, but he wasn’t going to stroke his ego by telling him so.

Instead, he nodded, saying “It sounds like it’ll work. I’ll hang around in the corridor, and as soon as Dumbledore leaves his office I’ll sneak in and get the Map. We just have to hope he leaves it on the desk.”

“Alright, but saying he’s watching the map? He’ll see you and know you’re there. He’ll put two and two together.”

Harry shook his head. “There’s a hidden passage near there that isn’t on the Map. I’ll hide in there.”

“Okay. Mixing the Moggrebod hair and dragon blood forms a kind of acid – eats through lots of things, including glass. “I’ll have to make it in the corridor, then pour it over the Skancy egg. After that I’ll run like hell, because it’s only going to take seconds to eat through the shell, and I don’t want to be anywhere near there when it explodes. “

“Sounds good,” replied Harry. “We don’t want him connecting you to it, either. It might be a good idea to hide with me and just run out when you need to put the acid on the egg.”

“Mm. Alright, well first off I’ll have to go to Hogsmeade tonight. I could check Severus’ stores, but then he’ll notice that the ingredients have been stolen. Plus, he has lots of wards on his private stores.”

“Yeah, might be safer to just go to Hogsmeade. Although, the stores will be closed after five.”

Malfoy shrugged unconcernedly. "I'll find a way in."

"A bit of breaking and entering, eh Malfoy?" Harry raised his eyebrows.

"Well how else do you expect me to get these ingredients?"

"As long as you leave money and don't actually break anything."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Leave money. How perfectly common."

Harry scowled. "That's generally the way it works, Malfoy. You get something in a shop, you pay for it."

"I usually don't handle the money."

"If it makes you feel better I'll pay for it."

Malfoy settled back, a smug look on his face. "Fine. I'll leave money."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Fine, but I'm coming with you to make sure you do."

Malfoy scowled.

...

That night, Harry went to bed at eleven and waited until he heard the snores of his fellow dorm mates. He lit his wand and glance at his watch, trying not to fall asleep. At eleven thirty, he decided he couldn't lay there without going to sleep and sat up quietly.

He had gone to bed dressed, and his broom sat at the end of the bed. Crawling forward, he grabbed it and pulled the Pendant out of his shirt. Then, after struggling into his Invisibility Cloak, he apparated to the edge of the Black Lake. He didn't want to apparate too far from the castle, not wanting to drain himself like last time he had apparated too far. He thought he had only drained himself from apparating through the wards, but it was better to be safe.



He set off around the lake, his feet crunching on the sand and his cloak swishing in the light breeze. The moon was full and the sky was clear, but covered in the Invisibility Cloak, he cast no shadow.

He arrived at the gate to the front of the school with fifteen minutes to spare, but only had to wait five before he heard the sound of someone moving over the grass. He stood still, searching out the source of the soft footsteps before he spoke in case it wasn't Malfoy.

He needn't have worried; seconds later he detected the pale face and white blonde hair of the Slytherin, glowing dimly in the light from the moon as he stepped out from the shadow of a willow.

"Malfoy." He stepped forward as Malfoy turned to face him.

"You're early."

"I was starting to fall asleep. Come on, let's go." Harry jumped on his broom and Malfoy did the same, and they took off into the air, shooting down the road to Hogsmeade.

They neared the wizarding town quickly and Malfoy took the lead, leading Harry around the outskirts and down in to a dark and empty street that Harry had never been in before.

They slowed down and Malfoy turned off down an alley, coming to a stop half way down. Harry dismounted and stood his broom against the brick wall before following Malfoy around the corner to the back of the shop.

"Where are we?" whispered Harry.

"Jordan's Potions. The apothecary in the main street is far better known. This one is much more out of the way."

"Why here though? Wouldn't we have more luck getting what we want in the other apothecary?"

"Don't be ridiculous Potter. We'll find everything we need here. I chose Jordan's because it has no security. A simple Alohamora,"

Malfoy tapped the lock on a small wooden door and Harry heard a click, “and we’re in.” There was a flash of white teeth as Malfoy grinned, turned the handle and stepped in to the dark shop, the door squeaking on rusty, unoiled hinges.

“Alright Potter, I’ll find the Dragon’s Blood and you look for the Skancy egg.” Malfoy set off, obviously having been in the shop before and knowing where to look.

Harry set off, lighting his wand to scan the shelves. The first row he passed had an arrow pointing down it that said ‘Trees, Flowers and Water Plants.’ The next indicated ‘Herbs, Crystals, Rocks and Minerals.’ The third held ‘Skin, Scales and Assorted Feathers.’ The fourth one he passed looked more promising. The sign read ‘Eggs, Entrails and Essences.’

Holding his wand aloft to read the labels that lined each shelf, he saw that they were arranged alphabetically. Harry walked up the row, searching for ‘S’ and quickly found the Skancy Eggs. There was a huge glass jar full of pale round balls, all sitting in a clear liquid.

Picking a small empty jar from a table at the end of the isle, he returned to the Skancy Eggs and pulled the lid off of the jar. Seeing a rag sitting on a shelf, he scrunched it up loosely and put it in the jar to protect the egg.

Picking up a pair of tongs, he gently lifted one of the eggs out of the liquid. He placed it carefully amongst the folds of the rag and snapped the lid on to the small glass jar. Stowing it safely in his pocket, he set off to find Malfoy.

The Slytherin was absorbed in the contents of the next row over, “Bloods and Other Bodily Fluids.”

“I got the Skancy Egg. Have you got the Dragon’s Blood?”

“Mm”

“Well c’mon. We should go.”

Malfoy dragged his eyes away from the array of potions ingredients and after Harry had dropped some sickles on the counter they left through the back door, locking it behind them.

Next update about one week.

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ReViEwErS!

THANKS : )

Crius Black-heart-green-eyes Vanessa riddle

Draconicflare Nxkris Ramos

Ruby Lunaris Windlg Ash Knight

Fhippogriff Jensindenial3516 Kaeim

.speechless Lord Magis Kris

oOo

Harry waited impatiently for the day to pass, but the clock was ticking impossibly slowly and the minutes dragged by. After breakfast he sat with Ron, Hermione and Pandora working on his Herbology assignment and then Potions homework. After lunch, they spent a few hours lazing by the lake, in the shade of a huge oak tree.

Finally dinner arrived, and Harry began to feel nervous. He was worried that they would be too late, or that something would go wrong with their hastily conceived plan. He barely touched his chicken, and couldn't stay focussed on the conversation around him. He could feel the weight of several dung bombs in one pocket and the bulk of his invisibility cloak in another. The Pendant sat cold on his chest.

Harry watched Dumbledore from the corner of his eyes, and when the old man stood, Harry did as well. Across the room at the Slytherin Table, Malfoy did the same. Harry excused himself, and thankfully no one tried to come with him. That was definitely one benefit of being friends with Ron and Hermione again; Pandora didn't feel the need to accompany him everywhere.

He walked quickly, turning down several corridors and running down a hidden passage. When he was sure no one was behind him, he apparated to the hidden corridor to meet Malfoy. The Slytherin arrived a moment later, out of breath from having jogged there.

"All ready to go?" asked Harry.

"Yeah," replied Malfoy, pulling out a vial of Dragon's blood, a vial containing two thick brown hairs, and the jar holding the Skancy egg. "Have you dropped the dung bombs yet?"

"No. I'm off to do it now. If Dumbledore comes, don't set off the explosion unless you see Tonks. Otherwise, wait until I get back."

Malfoy nodded, and Harry threw his cloak over himself and stepped out in to the empty corridor. He apparated to one end and deposited a dung bomb, then walked quickly to the other end of the corridor to leave the other.

He was just placing the second one down when he heard footsteps. Straightening, he saw Dumbledore, alone, opening the Gargoyle.

He immediately apparated back to the hidden passage where Malfoy was waiting and whipped off the cloak.

"That was fast," commented the Slytherin.

Harry shrugged. "Just in time, too."

"The password is Melting Moose Drops, if you need it. Senile old fool." Malfoy snorted softly as he fished the Skancy egg out of the jar. He handed it to Harry. "Hold."

Harry took it and cradled it gently in his hand, watching as Malfoy removed the stoppers from the vials containing the Moggrebod hair and the Dragon's blood. "Ready, Potter? Because as soon as I mix these, there's no going back."

"Do it." Harry listened closely for the sounds of footsteps, hoping Tonks wouldn't come too soon. He threw his cloak over himself again. "I'm going to roll the egg out in to the corridor now."

"Hang on! I thought of a better way to do this."

"What! We can't change the plan now!"

"Relax, Potter," hissed Malfoy. "I'm not changing much, just ensuring that Dumbledore won't catch me on that Map."

Malfoy pulled out a pair of dragon hide gloves. "Here, take the Moggrebod hairs and give me the egg." Harry placed the egg in Malfoy's outstretched and gloved hand and took hold of the cool glass vial.

"You know it feels really weird standing here talking to a disembodied voice."

"Got to be prepared."

“Okay, now you are going to drop those two Moggrebod hairs into the dragon blood, alright?” Malfoy waited for a response before continuing. “Good. Then, because we’ll only have seconds once the reaction is complete, I’ll pour the acid on the egg and roll it in to the corridor. The gloves will of course protect my hand from the acid. Then I’m running, because I don’t want to get caught. As soon as you see Dumbledore leave, do what you have to to get that Map back. Let’s just hope the crackpot isn’t deaf.”

Harry did as Malfoy said, his arm appearing out of thin air as he extended it to drop the hairs in the blood. As soon as they hit the sparkling crimson liquid, it began to froth and bubble, and Malfoy immediately poured the entire contents of the vial over the egg.

Harry held his breath as Malfoy stood right at the edge of the passage and threw the egg down the hall.

There was a resounding boom, Harry heard a whispered “Good Luck, Potter,” and Malfoy was gone down the dark tunnel.

Thirty seconds later, the Gargoyle slid aside and Dumbledore appeared, a curious expression on his face. As soon as Harry saw him, he apparated to the small room in the chamber tunnels where he had found the doorway to Dumbledore’s chambers. Taking the other door that he desperately hoped led to the headmaster’s office, he stepped through. A short flight of stairs led up, ending in a golden door that looked identical to the one that sat at the top of the moving staircase in Dumbledore’s office. Not willing to spend too much time thinking about it, he pulled it open and stepped through.

A sigh of relief escaped his lips at the sight of the circular office. Turning, he saw that he had indeed come through the golden door. Fawkes sat on his perch, beadily eyeing the spot where Harry was standing, and he had a nagging feeling that Fawkes could see him.

Reminding himself that he didn’t have much time, he strode over to Dumbledore’s desk and scanned the items lying there. A thrill of feelings – joy, success, excitement, relief - erupted in his chest when

he caught sight of the Map unfolded in the middle. He had been right; Dumbledore had been watching it.

He summoned it from beneath his cloak with a non-verbal Accio (courtesy of Snape's classes), and relished the feel of the worn parchment in his hand. Glancing at it, he saw that Dumbledore was still investigating the explosion in the corridor, now in the company of Tonks. It seemed they had acted at the most opportune time. Focussing on the dungeons, he saw that Malfoy was not in the dormitory as Harry had thought he would be, but in Snape's office sitting opposite the Potions Master. Glad that Malfoy had an alibi, he folded the Map and slid it in to his pocket, wanting to be out of here.

Not wanting to alert Dumbledore to his presence by apparating, in case he had wards like Snape, he marched back over to the door and opened it. Instead of the stone staircase he had used to get there, however, he saw the moving one.

He couldn't leave that way; Dumbledore might see the Gargoyle open. Closing the door again, he tried a different tack that always worked in the chamber.

"Open." The word was hissed out in a shallow breath, and to his great relief, the door swung open of its own accord, revealing narrow stone steps.

Pulling the door closed behind him, he took the stairs three at a time and jumped the last four. "Yes!" He was ecstatic with having the Map back, especially having stolen it from right under Dumbledore's nose.

He hadn't thought about it earlier, but it would be a good idea for him to have an alibi as well, and who better than Snape himself? The man was more likely than anyone to be suspicious of him, but if he was seen down in the dungeons, in Snape's office, then how could he have been anywhere near Dumbledore's office?

Grasping the Pendant, he apparated to the dungeons after ensuring there was no one standing near Snape's office. Shivering at the sudden change in temperature, he put the map in a deep pocket and knocked on the heavy wooden door.

“Enter.”

Harry pushed open the door, revealing Snape and Malfoy seated facing each other across the desk. Snape scowled at Harry and Malfoy quirked an eyebrow. He gave the barest of nods, addressing Snape but hoping that Malfoy would get the message. “Sir I was wondering if I could talk to you about er... my detention tomorrow night?”

It was actually an Occlumency lesson, but of course he couldn’t let Malfoy know that.

“As you can see Potter, I am currently engaged in a discussion with another student. If you would care to wait outside I shall let you in when we are done.”

Harry ignored Snape’s insulting tone and moved out of the doorway. “Yes, sir.” He closed the door and walked across to lean against the wall of the corridor opposite the door and wait for Snape and Malfoy to finish their discussion.

Five minutes later, he was shivering. The cold had soaked through his thin robes, and he hadn’t been wearing his cloak. He was considering just leaving, now that Snape had seen him when the door was flung open and Snape appeared in the doorway, a look of suspicion on his face. He spoke one word. “In.”

Harry moved in to the office when Snape stepped aside, to find Malfoy standing. “Professor, I’ll see you in class tomorrow,” said the Slytherin, giving a polite nod to Snape.

“Of course. Good evening, Draco.”

Snape closed the door behind Malfoy and spun to face Harry, still with a suspicious and somewhat curious look on his face. “You will remain here until I return, Potter. Refrain from touching anything.”

With that, Snape left the office, the door banging shut behind him. Dead silence reigned in the chilly dungeon, and he was immensely



glad that Snape had left his fire going. The corridor had been cold, but thankfully the office was warm.

The minutes dragged by. He assumed Dumbledore had called Snape through the Floo about the break in to his office, there was no other reason why Snape would tell him to wait and then just leave.

He was fidgeting nervously three quarters of an hour later when the door opened and Dumbledore entered, followed by Professor Snape.

He sat up straight in the chair, greeting Dumbledore.

“Harry, my boy. You must forgive Professor Snape for keeping you waiting, for in reality it was my fault. Unfortunately I had to call him away urgently to see to a matter.”

“Oh, that’s alright. I just had a question about my Occlumency lessons. My dreams are getting pretty bad, and I was hoping that maybe we could start with Legilimency soon.” This wasn’t entirely a lie, so hopefully he sounded at least slightly truthful.

Snape snorted loudly. “Well Albus, as you can see Occlumency has succeeded in allowing the boy to become a much more competent liar.”

Dumbledore gave a small smile. “Ah, well you did teach him, Severus.”

Harry jumped to his feet. “Hang on! Professor, I’m not lying about anything!”

“No one is accusing you of anything, Harry. Why don’t we all sit down and have a little chat.”

Returning Snape’s scowl, Harry did as Dumbledore said. The headmaster conjured an armchair next to Harry’s considerably less comfortable, wooden chair and sat down, while Snape sat behind the desk in his chair.

“How has your evening been, Harry?”

He gave a casual shrug. "Alright, I 'spose. After dinner I went to the library to check on some notes and then I came here. Just homework stuff."

"I expect with your exams coming up that you and your friends are putting a great deal of effort in to your studies?"

"Yes sir," he nodded.

"Cut the crap, Potter. We all know you haven't been doing homework this evening," snapped Snape, fixing Harry with a fierce glare.

Harry attempted to look affronted.

"Now, now Severus. Let us talk about this calmly."

"About what, sir?" he asked.

"It would seem that someone breached the wards on my office, much the same as Professor Snape's were breached some weeks ago."

Harry narrowed his eyes at Snape. "And you think I had something to do with it?"

"Astute observation," spat Snape.

"Once again Harry, I must ask you if you had anything to do with this breach. I must admit, I find it difficult to believe that you were near my office and down here mere minutes later. Professor Snape, however, is certain you were somehow involved, and I do trust his beliefs without hesitation."

"I didn't last time and I didn't last time. I don't know why you'd even suspect me!"

Snape began to talk, but Dumbledore cut him off. "Last time it was the nature of the object taken that led us to suspect you. However, I do not believe you could have gotten past Professor Snape's wards."

"I have discussed this with you Albus!" hissed Snape. "His Parseltongue abilities allow him to open doors that are effectively warded against anyone else."

"Yes, you have made me aware of this. You were also quite adamant that you had rectified the problem."

"That was before my chambers were broken in to!"

"Be that as it may, I am quite confident in your ability to protect your chambers from known threats. I do not believe Harry was involved in either of these break-ins." Dumbledore turned twinkling blue eyes on him, and he smiled weakly.

Snape crossed his arms angrily and glared first at Dumbledore and then at Harry.

"Well my boy, we won't keep you any longer. Perhaps if you ask your question again so that Professor Snape can answer it and you can get back to your friends?"

Harry turned his head to look at Snape. "Er... I was just wonder about Legilimency. My dreams are getting pretty bad, and I was hoping I was good enough to start it now?"

"From what Professor Snape has told me, it would seem you have been improving nicely," commented Dumbledore in a placid tone that Harry was sure was completely infuriating to Snape.

Dumbledore turned an enquiring eye towards Snape, who was looking thoroughly put out.

"A shame he has not yet succeeded in throwing me from his mind, which I may remind Mr. Potter, is the point of Occlumency," ground Snape, his teeth clenched.

"So that's... a no? Professor."

"Correct, Potter, as astounding as that is."

“Well, um... I’ll just be off then.” Harry stood and walked to the door. Opening it, turned back to face the two wizards. “Sir, I forgot to ask about your office. Was anything important taken?”

Dumbledore’s face did not betray his lie. “Oh, no. Not to worry, Harry. I haven’t noticed anything as yet, but if something was taken then I’m sure it will turn up eventually. I am more worried about the fact that someone got in. I confess myself quite impressed with my own magical skill, and someone who can so easily brush aside my magic is quite worrying to me. Don’t you worry, however. I assure you that Hogwarts is still quite safe.”

“Well, good night sir. Professor Snape.”

He received a pleasant nod from Dumbledore and a sneer from Snape before he shut the door and made his way up to Gryffindor Tower, the Map stowed safely in his robes and a victorious grin on his face.

...

“Harry! Where have you been?” called a voice as soon as he stepped through the portrait hole in to the common room.

He walked over to the chairs in front of the fire and flopped down into the one next to Hermione. “I’ve been down in Snape’s office.”  
“I didn’t know you had a detention mate!”

“I didn’t. I just went down to talk to him about er... a question about our essay.” He couldn’t talk about the Occlumency lessons in front of Pandora.

“Oh? What did you want to know Harry?” asked Hermione.

“Oh, a few things. It’s okay, I got it sorted.”

“Well you could have just asked me, Harry,” said Hermione. “You know I’d help you.”

“What! Just before you told me you wouldn’t help me. What’s the big deal?!” exclaimed Ron.

Hermione rolled her eyes and sighed. “Ron, I’ve already done nearly the whole assignment for you what with checking it over and giving hints. You can write the conclusion on your own.”

Harry shared a smile with Pandora as Ron and Hermione continued to bicker. An hour later, Harry said goodnight and he and Ron went up to bed, leaving the girls to chat.

“So you had an Occlumency lesson with Snape?” asked Ron as they went up the stairs.

Harry looked incredulously at Ron. “You got that?”

“Well yeah, I mean, why else would you go see him? You could just ask Herm if you needed help.”

Harry smiled. “Yeah, I guess I would. Still, Hermione didn’t really take the hint. She usually more perceptive.”

“Yeah, I guess some of her virtues are rubbing off on me.”

They shared a laugh before going in to the dormitory and changing for bed.

oOo

Harry woke early from a nasty vision on Monday morning and dragged himself down to the common room. The sun still hadn’t risen, but he couldn’t sleep again. It was becoming a common occurrence, and he had been losing a lot of sleep. He had an Occlumency lesson that night, and he was determined to succeed. If he didn’t, he was going to take a leaf out of Hermione’s book and get a book out of the library. He could at least start to teach himself, even if he couldn’t practice with anyone.

Deciding to put the time alone to good use, he cleared his mind and worked on his animagus transformation. He felt the tingling sensation

as his teeth and tongue changed, but other than that he remained unchanged.

Two hours later, people began to slowly drift down to the common room and he resumed his normal appearance.

He walked down to breakfast with Seamus, Neville and Dean, and ten minutes later they were joined by their dorm mates.

...

The day passed quickly and Harry made his way down to the dungeons. He was determined to achieve success tonight; he had been practising with Malfoy several times a week and had been clearing his mind every night, and he was certain he was close to being able to push Snape out. He had noticed a change in his temperament and anger control since he had begun really learning Occlumency. He no longer so willingly displayed his emotions, and he could control his emotions much better than he had once been able to. Often when he caught sight of himself in the mirror his face was a stoic mask.

He was feeling quite jubilant. He was still happy about getting the map back, and he had had no arguments with anyone. All in all, he was in an excellent mood.

They began as usual, and Harry could immediately tell that his mind was strong tonight. He could feel Snape's mental push, but in his mind, Snape just kept falling through empty and endless blackness. Harry knew there was no way Snape was getting at his memories.

Now all he had to do was throw the man out.

After ten minutes however, no amount of wishing and will power had made him succeed. He could hear Snape's sneering voice trying to distract him.

Steeling his resolve, he recalled the isolation he had felt when his Aunt and Uncle had locked him in his cupboard, letting the feeling overcome all else but the darkness. He remembered feeling alone.

And just like that, he was. He could no longer detect Snape's smooth presence coursing through his mind, no longer feel the tug at his memories. Opening his eyes, he grinned broadly at Snape, who was staring at him with a mixture of disgust, and to Harry's surprise, relief.

"Well Potter, I knew that given enough time even you could manage this."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You know, it wouldn't kill you to tell me I did a good job." He didn't care if Snape gave him detention for being cheeky; he was feeling euphoric at having succeeded. To his surprise, Snape merely replied, "It would however, be an extremely painful and discomforting experience."

Harry gave a tired smile. "So can we start with Legilimency now?"

Snape tilted his head in a nod. "As I said, once you have mastered Occlumency to my satisfaction, we will begin Legilimency. If you show me you can do that again, I will consider you competent enough to begin."

Harry leaned forward, ready to try again, but Snape waved him off. "Not tonight. Go to bed, clear your mind and we will meet again on Wednesday. If you can throw me out again then, that is when we will commence Legilimency."

Sighing, but holding his tongue when he saw Snape's warning look, he got to his feet and left the office.

oOo

The next day, he was still on a high from having succeeded in throwing Snape from his mind.

His jubilation impacted on his class work. For the first time ever in Transfiguration, he mastered the spell on his first try. Professor McGonagall was extremely impressed and awarded him twenty points when only two minutes in to the lesson he transfigured his mop head in to a shaggy brown puppy.

After transfiguration, he had Potions. For once, Snape didn't make any sarcastic comments for the sake of it, and he found the Potion they were making unusually easy. He actually found the rhythmic chopping of ingredients somewhat relaxing.

He was cutting up the last ingredient for their potion, a Wart Removal Cream, when Malfoy pushed a folded bit of parchment across the table towards him. He gave the Slytherin a questioning look, but Malfoy wasn't looking at him. Harry reached out and was about to read it when Snape approached their bench. Shoving it into his pocket, he returned to cutting his Mandrake roots.

A half hour later their potion was a perfect pale orange, and Harry started cleaning up while Malfoy stoppered a vial of their potion for marking. They finished before the bell, and Harry waited outside for Hermione, Pandora and Seamus. Hermione finished only a few minutes later, and they sat chatting in the corridor until the other two had finished.

...

After lunch and Herbology, he was sitting at a table in the common room working on homework with Ron, Hermione and Pandora when he remembered the note from Malfoy. Slipping his hand in to his pocket, he pulled out the folded piece of parchment and unfolded it beneath the table. Written in Malfoy's elegant scrawling script, it read;

Potter II, Malfoy III

"Damn!"

"What is it, mate?" asked Ron.

Harry looked up. All three of them were staring at him, confused.

"Oh...er, nothing, nothing. Don't worry."

He cast a wordless Incendio on the scrap of parchment and went back to his work. He had a feeling Malfoy would be waiting in Myrtle's



bathroom after dinner, just waiting to show off his newest transformation. Despite the fact that he was annoyed that Malfoy had once again beaten him to it, he couldn't wait to see it.

So after he had returned to the common room, he told the others he was taking a book back to the library and rushed out of the common room before they could even answer him. He heard Hermione call after him, but he ignored her and shut the portrait behind him. Turning in to the first hidden passage he could find, he threw on his invisibility cloak and apparated directly in to the bathroom.

Malfoy wasn't there yet, so he lounged against the wall and waited. Ten minutes later, the door opened and the Slytherin stepped through after peering cautiously in to the room.

"You should know by now that no one ever comes in here Malfoy." He laughed when Malfoy jumped at the sound of his voice.

"Shite, Potter. I really hate it when you wear that thing," said Malfoy to a patch of air some distance away from where Harry was standing.

"I'm over he-re." He pulled off the cloak, grinning at Malfoy's scowl.

"So what changed this time?" he asked as he walked over to open the sink.

"I've half a mind not to show you now," sniffed Malfoy, his nose in the air.

"As if you can resist the chance to show off."

Malfoy ignored him and they made their way down to the Chamber.

"So you got the Map back, right?"

"Uh huh."

"You got down to Snape's office pretty quick."

"I ran. Snape still thinks it was me though."

Malfoy gave him a scrutinising look, and Harry had the feeling that Malfoy knew he was lying.

“So are you going to show me your animagus transformation or what?”

“Of course! It’s fantastic.” Malfoy relaxed his body for a second and Harry watched as Malfoy’s forehead and around his eyes morphed in to orange scales. His pupils lengthened into vertical black slits and the silver-grey irises changed to a burning orange.

What had never happened before was Malfoy’s white-blond strands of hair standing straight up and fusing together in spikes along the middle of his head and to the top of his neck, kind of like a Mohawk.

On either side of the steely looking spikes were the lumps of bone that had now morphed in to something that Harry would actually call horns, even if they were only small ones.

“Comment?” said Malfoy expectantly.

“Well the horns have gotten bigger. They actually do look like horns now.”

“They looked like horns before!”

“Yeah, well they look more like horns then. Anyway, those spikes are nice.”

Malfoy ran a finger over them. “They’re sharp, too. Have you been practicing?”

“Course I have. The only reason you’re ahead of me is because you had some idea what animal you were going to be.”

“Either that or I’m just naturally superior.”

Harry snorted. "Whatever you reckon. Anyway, we still don't know for sure that you're a dragon. You could be a... a crocodile or something."

Malfoy laughed loudly. "A crocodile, Potter! Are you serious? Since when do crocodiles have orange scales and eyes?"

"Well I don't know! I'm just speculating. Anyway, are you going to walk around like that all night, because it's a tad disconcerting?"

Malfoy grinned evilly. "In that case, most definitely."

Harry rolled his eyes and flopped down on the lounge with his bag. "Well, I have to thank you for helping me get the Map back."

"I only did it so I could keep coming down here."

"I know that, but still. And thanks for the Occlumency lesson especially."

Malfoy suddenly looked worried. "What? Who tried to read your mind? Was it Snape?"

"Oh, no don't worry. Nobody read my mind."

Malfoy relaxed slightly. "You're sure."

He nodded emphatically. "I'm really good at Occlumency now."

"You've only thrown me out a few times, and Snape's much better than me."

"I was practicing by myself. Trust me, you're safe."

"Fine," grumbled Malfoy, but he still looked slightly uneasy.

Harry undid the zip and started rummaging in his bag. "I have something to show you, as thanks for helping me get the Map back."

Malfoy leaned forward, interested, and Harry pulled out 'The Dark Arts – An Historic Account.'

Malfoy's eyes widened comically as he reached for the aged leather book. "Severus asked me about this, you know. He was convinced you took it, but he just couldn't prove it.

"He made wards specifically to keep me out of his office, you know. Git."

"Be fair, Potter. He has every right to do that."

"I guess, but he tested it without telling me first."

Malfoy chuckled. "Sounds like something he would do."

oOo

Next chapter should hopefully be up in about ten days. Sorry if it's longer, but I'm starting to get really busy with exams coming up. : )

oOo

Thanks to reviewers:

## Progress On All Fronts

Wednesday night found both Harry and Malfoy once again in the chamber, Harry with his nose buried in 'The Dark Arts; An Historic Account.' He still hadn't found Dolohov's curse, and suddenly it occurred to him that there was someone he could ask.

"Hey Malfoy, can you help me? I'm looking for a particular spell."

"Mm? Which one?"

"Well, I don't know what it's called. Last year at the Ministry Ginny got hit with some sort of cutting curse. I'm trying to find that one."

"Hm, not much information. Do you know anything about it besides the fact that it's a cutting curse? Maybe you heard the incantation?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I'm pretty sure I didn't. At least, if I did then I don't remember it, but I think Dolohov did it wordlessly. Oh, it was purple though. That's it."

Malfoy's face lit up with recognition. "Ah, yes. I know the one you want," he said, reaching forward to take the book. "That's a specialty of Anton's. If I'm correct..."

Malfoy turned to the beginning of the book and began flipping through the pages. "It's an old old curse, and definitely in this book." The Slytherin hummed as he paged through the book. After a minute he held it up. "Ah ha! Here it is." Malfoy handed the book back, pointing at the middle of the page. "Shaza Tir. It's especially dangerous because it a normal shield won't hold up against it, you need the specific counter shield."

Harry took the book and peered at the page. There was a brief history of the spell, as well as incantations and wand movements for the spell and the shield.

Shaza Tir is a cutting hex invented by an Ancient Egyptian wizard, Mohit Fazza. It is one of several foreign magic spells that have

become common in the repertoire of spells used by Dark Wizards in Europe.

The incantation is the same as the name, Shaza Tir, and the wand movement is a slash in the direction of the intended victim. Though it can be countered with a very powerful Protego, most wizards are not capable of producing such a strong Protego. The specific shield requires the incantation Poshtu Yut, with the wand pointed at the oncoming spell.

The hex forms in a bright purple flash of light. The effect of the hex, when properly incanted, are deep cuts which bleed profusely and can be difficult to heal completely with standard healing spells.

In the 15th century the spell was declared illegal in England and some countries on the continent.

Propping the book open upside down on the lounge, Harry walked to an open space and took out his wand to practice the shield.

After a half an hour of shouting, he had only once managed to produce result, and that had been an extremely dim wisp of light that faded immediately.

He had been saying the words as they were spelt, but as they weren't in Latin, he wasn't sure if he was pronouncing them right or if he was putting the emphasis on the right syllables.

Squaring his shoulders, he assumed a duelling stance and began to have another go.

Half way through the incantation, he heard a book snap shut and looked up. Malfoy gave an exaggerated sigh and stood, stretching. "Honestly Potter, don't you know anything besides what they teach us? Do you even know that much?"

"In case you hadn't noticed, I'm trying to teach myself something right now!"

“Funny, it looks to me like your pointlessly repeating the same useless word over and over again.”

“Look, don’t just stand there and criticise. I’ll get it, I’m just not sure of the proper way to say it.”

“You could have asked.”

Harry scowled in exasperation and annoyance. “Well if you know how to do it, why didn’t you tell me, instead of standing there watching me do it wrong!?”

“Because it’s entertaining.”

Harry threw his hands in the air and turned away. “Do you have to be so difficult all of the time?”

Malfoy walked over and peered down at the book, ignoring Harry’s scowl. “Hmm, well it’s Arabic so... yes.... you pronounce it ‘Poshtu Yut’ I think,” said Malfoy, saying it with a slight accent and a little differently to how Harry had been doing it.

Glaring, Harry grudgingly nodded and took the book back, mentally reciting the way Malfoy had spoken the words.

After a minute he put the book down again and moved back to the open space where he had been practicing.

Extending his wand arm, he performed the wand movement and said the spell. This time, he felt the rush of magic and a brief but defined shield erupted from the end of his wand. It faded quickly, but the orange burst of light had been strong and definite.

“Yes!” he shouted, relieved at having finally produced a result.

“Passable, I suppose, considering it was your first attempt where you said the spell correctly,” replied Malfoy in a sneering tone.

“Well I’d like to see you try it!” scowled Harry.

“Fine.” Malfoy stepped forward brandishing his wand, a superior look on his pointed face. Harry watched as the Slytherin assumed a duelling stance and performed the spell. “Poshtu Yut!”

Harry smirked in satisfaction when nothing happened. “Nice.”

Malfoy frowned at him. “And how many times did it take you to produce that pathetic excuse for a shield?”

“Erm... once, when I knew how to say it properly.”

Malfoy huffed and tried the spell again, to no avail. “Well, you were bound to be better than me at something,” said Malfoy, relenting.

“Don’t sound so surprised. I’ve been top of defence since first year.” He smiled with pride.

“Don’t gloat.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Oh, of course. Wouldn’t want to infringe on your trademark trait, would I?”

“I, Potter, do not gloat,” said Malfoy, sticking his nose in the air. “There is a clear difference between showing pride and gloating.”

“A clear difference which you clearly do not understand.”

Malfoy abruptly changed the subject. “Well, you do seem awfully confident, Potter. If you’d like, I could help you practice that shield,” said Malfoy, twirling his wand and smiling dangerously.

“I don’t think I feel quite so confident yet that I want you to throw that curse at me.”

Malfoy shrugged and walked back to his armchair, taking the book with him. “Your loss,” he called lightly.

...



The next day after Potions, Harry had a team Quidditch Practice. Their next match wasn't for a month, but it was the final match and it was against Slytherin, so it was the general consensus of the team that they get in a good few practices.

After they were finished, he and Ron had quick showers before going down to dinner with the rest of the team. Harry shovelled his food into his mouth, wanting dinner to be over. He had his next lesson with Snape after dinner, and he was desperately hoping that it would be a Legilimency lesson rather than an Occlumency one. Snape had said that if Harry could once again successfully throw him out using only will power, then they could move on to Legilimency.

Harry kept one eye glued to the Head Table, and when Snape finally got up to leave, he let out a deep breath he had been unconsciously holding. He impatiently waited five minutes and then bid goodbye to his friends. Ron and Hermione knew it was an Occlumency lesson and not a detention, but they still gave him sympathetic looks along with everyone else. After all, it was still Snape.

Once he had left the Great Hall, he walked as quickly as he could without actually running down to Snape's office. He knocked, and entered at the Professor's call.

Snape greeted him with his usual surly scowl, but he was not sitting marking essays as he usually was. Instead, he was leaning over his desk, upon which lay a pensieve, full of a glistening silver substance that resembled quicksilver. The substance swirled and whirled, and as Harry watched, Snape lifted his wand to his temple. When he took it away, a string of silver was dragged after it, stretching until it broke away from Snape's skin and gathered in a blob on the end of his wand.

Snape moved the wand down to the pensieve until it was nearly touching and let the memory fall into the stone basin. For a few seconds, the liquid swirled quicker, and Harry saw flashes of colour and indistinguishable, semi-transparent images flash along the surface.

When the liquid stilled, Snape took his seat and motioned for Harry to sit. Trying his best to ignore the pensieve that sat so intrusively on the desk, forcefully reminding Harry of the last time he had seen it, he sat and waited for Snape to speak.

"We shall begin as usual. Clear your mind, attempt to throw me out."

Harry did as he was told. He could easily clear his mind now, and it was less than a minute before Snape entered his mind. Doing as he had done in the previous lesson, he envisioned his cupboard and the silent solitary space it had provided. After a very brief mental struggle, Harry found himself alone with his thoughts, and Snape sat back.

Looking rather displeased, Snape looked at Harry and said in a somewhat reluctant voice, "Well, Potter. It would appear that it is time for us to move on to the study of Legilimency."

Harry couldn't help but grin, and it was all he could do not to let out a victory yell.

"However," said Snape, raising his voice, "We shall continue to practice Occlumency simultaneously. A master is able to prevent a Legilimens from even entering his mind. Even better, they are able to guide and misdirect a Legilimens so that the attacker does not even realise that they are being misled. This in fact is more effective than merely being able to block thoughts. Legilimency training will actually aid in this as it will teach you to control your own mind."

Harry nodded. He was happy as long as they started on Legilimency.

"We shall begin with the basics. By now you know the incantation is 'Legilimens.' The wand movement is simply to point your wand at the one from whose mind you wish to glean facts. However, pointing the wand and saying the incantation alone is not enough. You need intent, to imagine that you are already in the intended target's, in this case, my mind."

"You mean you actually want me to read your mind?" He was surprised, but secretly pleased. He now knew why Snape had been using the pensieve. Snape had obviously thought he would

succeeded with Occlumency, as he had been putting memories in the pensieve before Harry had gotten there.

“How else do you expect to learn, Potter?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I didn’t really think about it...”

Snape gave him a look that seemed to say ‘No!? Really?’ and raised an eyebrow.

Snape stood and put his wand to his temple again, removing another memory. Harry watched as it was placed in the pensieve.

Snape saw him watching. “Yes, I’m sure you recognise this from your previous jaunt through my memories.”

Harry blushed slightly in shame, but he wasn’t going to be sorry. He had already apologised for that. Plus, he hadn’t even known what a pensieve was before then, as he had previously explained to the man.

“I am extremely doubtful you will see anything I do not let you see. In fact, there is no change you will. However, it is always best to be careful.”

Snape sat again. “Now, I want you to attempt to gain access to my mind. If you cannot, I will lower my shields bit by bit until we reach a level where you are able to get in.”

Harry nodded understanding and pointed his wand at Snape. It was a good feeling.

“Legilimens.”

There was a brief silence in the room.

“Again.”

“Legilimens.”

...

“Again.”

“Legilimens.”

...

“Again.”

...

This continued for some time until Harry's head was pounding. This was like the mental equivalent of trying to push through a wall of glad wrap that refused to break. There was something there, stopping him from getting through, but he didn't know what it was and he couldn't see it. It was simply a pressure of sorts at the front of his mind.

On what seemed like his millionth try, Harry felt an odd sensation, and his first thought was that he had finally done it. Everything went black, and that was certainly how he imagined Snape's mind. After that, he knew no more.

...

He woke to find he had collapsed forward onto the desk. Along with the headache, he now had a sore forehead. Groaning, he lifted his head up. Given that Snape was calmly sitting in his chair, he assumed he had only been out for a few seconds. Either that or Snape just didn't care that he had fainted.

Snape sneered. “Congratulations, Potter. My defences are completely removed and still you cannot get it right.”

Harry was far too tired to respond to the comment, which was clearly a barb and nothing else.

He felt a hand on his arm and realised Snape had come around to his side of the table and was trying to get him to stand. Pushing himself to his feet, he found a vial of a light blue potion that he recognised as

a Headache Draft pressed into his hand. Gladly uncorking it, he swallowed it down and waited for the pain to abate.

Snape pressed another vial into his hand.

“Dreamless sleep potion. Your mind will most likely be weak tonight. I can’t stop any visions, but we can keep any dreams at bay.”

Harry started to pull out the stopper, but Snape roughly grabbed his hand, wrenching the vial from his hand and stuffing it into a pocket of Harry’s robes.

“Don’t drink it here, stupid boy, unless you want to sleep on a cold stone floor. Be assured I won’t carry you to your bed. Not that I’d care if you woke up with a stiff back, but the House Elves have to clean.”

“Oh... yeah,” he muttered, rubbing his eyes tiredly and massaging his temples.

“Well, off with you. I shall inform you of when your next lesson will be.”

Harry stumbled to the door and out into the corridor, where he shuffled slowly along. He had just reached the corridor that would take him up to the Great Hall when he heard footsteps behind him. Turning, he saw Malfoy approaching him.

Groaning, he stopped.

“Potter. Snape kept you for a long time. He really doesn’t like you, does he?”

Harry realized Malfoy thought that he had had a detention. “Um... yeah... slave driver.”

“Well, I wanted to talk to you.”

“How did you know I was finished?”

“I had a first year wait for you to leave and inform me when you did so.”

Harry shook his head despairingly. “I don’t think that’s what first years are for.”

Malfoy shrugged, clearly disagreeing. “They do what I say.”

“What do you want, Malfoy?” he asked wearily. He really wasn’t in the mood to deal with the Slytherin right now.

“Let’s go to the Chamber.”

“Not tonight, Malfoy. I have a massive headache.”

“Oh... Well you don’t have to come. You can just let me in and then go. I know how to get out.”

“I said no!” snapped Harry. His head was really pounding. “My head is killing me. I just really want to go to bed.”

“Oh, come on Potter.”

“No! Bloody hell, do you never listen?” He turned and stomped away, a hand to his head. “Bloody Malfoy,” he muttered. Looking back as he turned the corner, he saw Malfoy still standing in the corridor, looking quite taken aback.

He turned back, feeling a small burst of satisfaction when he ran into someone rounding the corner. The person was considerably taller than him, and he fell backwards.

“Sorry mate! You alright?” He heard Ron’s voice, and allowed the redhead to pull him up.

“Not really.”

“Sorry, I didn’t see you.”

“Oh, it isn’t your fault. I just have this massive headache.”

Ron scowled. "Snape's a bastard."

"That I agree with. How come you're down here?"

"Mione told me I should come and get you. She said Legilimency is heaps harder than Occlumency."

"No doubt about that," Harry muttered in reply. "I'm really feeling it." The Headache Draught seemed to be taking effect, but slowly. He could still feel his head pounding, just not as much as before.

Ron looked sympathetic. "Bad luck, mate."

"Yeah..."

Though it took longer than usual, they finally made it back to the Gryffindor Common Room, Ron shooting him worried looks along the way.. He was extremely grateful to Ron for coming to get him; he had been leaning on him for support by the time they reached the portrait hole. He pulled himself up the stairs to the dormitory, using the banister for support.

Without bothering to even take off his shoes, he mumbled goodnight to Ron, downed the contents of the Dreamless Sleep vial and was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

oOo

Snape had been right when he had said Harry's mind would be weak. The first thing Harry knew when he woke was a blinding pain in his head, radiating outwards from his scar. Somewhere in the back of his mind, it registered that hands were trying to pry his hands from his forehead, and that his throat was raw from screams that were still issuing from his mouth.

Slowly he began to be aware of where he was, and his screams died away. A voice was gently soothing him, and he felt someone put a cool towel on his forehead and a vial was held to his lips.

He swallowed the cool liquid and felt the pain in his scar dim slightly. He opened his eyes, squinting in light that appeared far too bright. The bright white walls and starched sheet that was being tucked tightly around him alerted him to the fact that he was in the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey moved away, her heels clicking on the stone floor. He could hear voices talking quietly near the end of his bed.

He sat up slowly and felt for his glasses on the bedside table, pushing them up and sighing in relief as the room came into focus. A glass of water sat on the table and he thirstily drank the cool water, easing the ache in his throat.

The voices had stopped, and he saw that they had belonged to Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall.

“Harry, my boy. It is a relief to see you finally awake.”

He started to reply, but instead settled for throwing up over the side of the bed. Madam Pomfrey returned, tisking, and after clearing his mess handed him another vial of the potion he had just taken.

“Well Albus, I shall be off,” said McGonagall, standing and smoothing her robes.

“Of course, Minerva. I daresay your first years are looking forward to the lesson you have planned today.”

After McGonagall had left and Madam Pomfrey had bustled away, Dumbledore conjured a chair next to Harry’s bed and took a seat.

“What happened sir? The last thing I remember is going to sleep after my lesson with Snape.”

“Your friends were woken last night by your restless sleep, and were unable to rouse you. Mr Weasley alerted Professor McGonagall and you were brought here. Several minutes ago you began to scream, and then you finally woke up.”

“Oh.”



“Did you experience a vision of Voldemort?”

Harry shook his head, belatedly realising that that wasn't a good idea when it made his head pound harder. “No. Nothing. It was just really painful.”

“Hm... I would surmise that your mind-wearying attempt at Legilimency left you mind very open to the connection that you share with Lord Voldemort. That said, I do not believe this event shall recur once you grasp even the very basics of Legilimency.”

Harry was immensely glad of that. He certainly didn't want to experience that debilitating pain again.

“I shall leave you to your rest, Harry. I imagine you don't feel quite like talking at present.”

Harry smiled weakly and closed his eyes as Dumbledore left, falling into a light doze as the pain-relieving potion he had drunk went to work.

...

By first lunch he was feeling normal and Madam Pomfrey reluctantly let him leave.

No sooner had he stepped out of the hospital wing then he was accosted by none other than Draco Malfoy.

“You could have picked a better day to get stuck in the hospital wing, Potter.”

Harry spun, surprised. “Huh?”

“Eloquent, as usual.” Malfoy approached, his school bag slung over a shoulder. “I had to hold my own in defence, and pretty much everyone is getting to be decent duellists by now.”

“It's not like I wanted to miss it. Defence is my favourite lesson, you know.”

“Well, just don’t miss another one.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Are you over whatever little tiff you were in last night?”

Harry scowled. “I was not in a tiff. I’d just had detention with Snape, who hates me, and I had a massive headache. Excuse me if my temper was a little short.”

Harry stopped short. Without him realising it, they had ended up in the corridor of Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. At least, he hadn’t realised it. He narrowed his eyes at Malfoy and received a waggle of the eyebrows in return, making him scowl half-heartedly.

Rolling his eyes, he started forward again and led them in to the bathroom. Down in the chamber, Malfoy settled down to read and Harry found a comfortable position on the lounge and began to practice his animagus transformation. The cool darkness of the chamber soothed his mind and he slipped easily into the meditative state

Far quicker than he had anticipated, and with a rush of triumph, he felt the sensation of a new transformation. This time, the feeling started in his toes, and he crinkled his nose. It grew, spreading backwards through his foot to his heel. Suddenly he felt a slightly painful pressure in his feet, and he heard the sound of fabric ripping.

His eyes popped open and saw Malfoy looking up from his book with interest.

Grinning, he stuck out his feet. He couldn’t see them, since he was wearing shoes, but they now felt extremely tight. What was even more noticeable however, was the black spike that was sticking cleanly through the back of his runners. His grin widened.

“You’re like an excited little puppy, Potter,” said Malfoy as he got up from the armchair.

Harry scowled at Malfoy. "You can talk. You should have seen your face when you made your first transformation."

Malfoy didn't reply, instead maintaining a dignified silence.

Harry stood and twisted to see the spikes again. "Agh, but look at my shoes. They're ruined!" There was a gaping hole in the heel of each shoe, and shreds of material sticking out

"Certainly gives you that shabby look," said Malfoy, smirking.

"Well, to be honest I have needed new shoes for a while now." The Dursleys rarely bought Harry anything, and this year he hadn't even had a chance to go to Diagon Alley during the holidays, so his shoes were getting quite small. Given that, he was glad of a reason to buy a new pair.

The only problem was, he had no money.

"Hey Malfoy, up for another trip to the apothecary? I'm going to need some money."

Malfoy hummed. "I suppose. Only if I get a share, though."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Whatever you want. I just need new shoes."

...

Once Harry had had the transformation, Malfoy abandoned his book and tried to best him, but had no success.

It was ten to two when Harry looked at his watch and gave a yell. "Shite, Malfoy! We've got Potions in ten minutes!"

Frantically looking around, he realised he didn't have his bag with him. Grabbing a cushion off the lounge, he transfigured it into one and ripped it open, stuffing a roll of parchment from the table into it, along with a quill that was lying beside it. "Let's go! Snape'll give me detention if I'm late."

He took off towards the passages that led to the dungeons, Malfoy right behind him.

Frustrated that he couldn't just use the Pendant with Malfoy there, he walked faster down the stone passageway, breaking into a run when he glanced at his watch again and saw that they only had six minutes.

"You never told me how you did in Defence this morning," puffed Harry as he ran.

"Well just so you know, we now have one loss. We're still in the lead of course, and I don't know if Snape'll actually count it as a loss seeing as you weren't there," replied Malfoy between deep breaths.

"Seeing as it's you, he probably won't."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're Snape's favourite student. He never takes points off you."

By now they had reached the door that would open into the corridor right near their classroom, and Harry hissed the Parseltongue command to open it. The stone slid heavily across the floor leaving an opening into the corridor and they stepped through.

Harry grimaced; they were late, and Snape wouldn't care that it was only by less than a minute.

Opening the door, he stepped into the room, interrupting Snape's lecture.

"Late, Potter. Points for that I th- Mr. Malfoy," he finished as the Slytherin stepped into the room behind him. Snape scowled heavily, his eyes narrowed. "Take a seat, both of you," he snapped, and Harry did his best to hide his grin.

Harry took his seat with Malfoy, giving him an 'I told you so' look which Malfoy ignored.

...

The next Hogsmeade trip was that weekend, and he needed to make sure he could go. He could always sneak in if the teachers wouldn't let him go, but he wanted to spend time with Ron and Hermione.

Currently, he was sitting with them and Pandora in the Gryffindor Common Room working on a particularly difficult Herbology Essay. He dug his parchment and quill out of his transfigured bag, reminding himself that he had to get his proper equipment before he went to astronomy.

"Nobody said it was easy," came Hermione's stern voice.

"No one ever said it would be this ha-ard!" whined Ron, throwing down his own quill. "Hey Harry, why does your bag have tassels?"

"Wha- Oh!" He chuckled. "I didn't notice those. I was going to be late for Potions, so I just transfigured a cushion from the lounge into a bag. I was still late, but at least he didn't take points."

"I know! That was good luck, mate, coming in at the same time as Malfoy."

He plucked some stray bits of stuffing off of his quill that hadn't quite known what to do with themselves when he transfigured the cushion. "Harry, what's that?"

"What's what Mione?"

"That marking on your quill. It looks like it says... DM."

Harry frowned, turning the quill to find the initials. Delicately engraved in the silver casing of the quill was an elegant set of initials, and Harry realised it must have been Malfoy who left the quill in the chamber.

"I must have taken it after Potions. He's probably got mine."

Ron snorted. "What kind of arrogant twot gets their initials engraved on their quill?"

"Lots of people do it, Ron. Especially if it's an expensive quill," replied Pandora.

Harry jumped up. "Anyway guys, I'm going to go and see McGonagall for a minute. I'll be back after astronomy."

The others looked up from their work. "What'ya needa see McGonagall for?" asked Ron, scratching his head with the end of his quill.

"Hogsmeade this weekend. I really want to go."

"Harry, you know how careful Dumbledore's being. He won't let you go," said Hermione, looking at him with sympathy,

"Quiet Mione, don't be so negative," said Ron, waving a hand to hush her. "Go harass her till she says yes, mate!"

Grinning at Ron's vehemence, he nodded and turned to leave.

"Hang on Harry, I'll come with you. Moral support." Pandora jumped to her feet and led the way to the portrait hole. Smiling, Harry followed her out and they made their way to their Head of House's office.

Five minutes later, they were seated in front of her desk.

"What is it you wished to discuss with me, Mr. Potter?"

"It's about Hogsmeade, Professor. I'd really like to go this weekend."

"You know that is not possible Mr. Potter. It has been discussed at length and decided it would be unsafe."

"But it's safe to let everyone else go? If you were expecting something to happen you wouldn't let any students go!"

Pandora nudged him when McGonagall gave him a stern look. "What Harry means to say Professor, is that he'll be perfectly safe with the rest of us." She smile charmingly. "We won't let him out of our sight."

McGonagall pursed her lips tightly, flicking her eyes between the two of them. "Please Professor," he said earnestly. I really want to just have some fun with my friends. Besides, I need new shoes. The ones I've got now are practically falling off of my feet."

To demonstrate his point, he lifted a foot up on to the desk, letting her see the stretched leather and shreds that stuck out the back.

McGonagall quirked an eyebrow. "Well, I can't say it's a particularly good excuse, but you certainly do need a new pair."

"I'm sure everything will be fine. I mean, what going to happen to him in Zonko's?"

McGonagall leaned back, surveying them both carefully. "We shall see," she relented. "I suppose just this one time, and I shall of course have to speak to Dumbledore first. I shall let you know tomorrow morning of his decision, Mr. Potter."

Harry grinned widely at his Head of House. "Thanks Professor!"

"Don't thank me yet, Mr. Potter. The decision is entirely up to the Headmaster."

They left McGonagall's office, Harry feeling convinced that he would be allowed to go. "Thanks Pandora, I don't think I could have managed to convince her if it wasn't for you."

Pandora grinned. "No worries, Harry. It'll be fun!"

...

He and Ron had completely regained their old camaraderie, and Harry was feeling more at ease than he ever had with all aspects of his life as the four of them chatted happily, strolling along the lane to Hogsmeade. When they got there, he and Ron dragged the girls into Zonko's and they spent a half-hour looking at new joke products.

He and Malfoy had stopped by the Basilisk Chamber after astronomy to gather some scales, and discuss the plan. Malfoy was to have gone to the apothecary as soon as he got to Hogsmeade, in disguise as he had last time and then leave Harry's bag of galleons in Scirvenshafts, which was right next to Zonko's and where Harry new Hermione would want to visit next.

As he had predicted, no sooner had they left Zonko's then Hermione grabbed Ron by the arm and dragged him in to the Wizing stationary shop. He and Pandora followed, breaking apart to peruse the shelves.

Scrivenshafts sold a small range of Muggle stationary supplies, and it was to this part of the shop that Harry drifted to. It was in an out of the way corner, and most of the supplies there were covered in dust. There wasn't much, really, just some pens, staplers, and for some strange reason what must have been a hundred hand size sacks of colourful paperclips. He doubted if many wizards actually knew what staplers and paperclips were for.

Malfoy hadn't told him where exactly he was going to hide the bag, but now that Harry saw the range it had to be in with the bags of paperclips. He picked up a few, judging by the weight as to whether it was his money or not. Finally, right at the bottom of the considerably large pile, he found a bag that was much heavier than the rest and clinked loudly in the quiet corner where he stood. He slipped the bag into his pocket and made his way back to the main part of the shop.

...

Harry had the best day he had had in ages, and when they finally stumbled back to Hogwarts (he in a comfortable pair of new real leather shoes), he was ready for dinner and bed.

oOo

Hey guys, I know it's been a lot longer than I said it would be, but I have been SO busy. Lecturers gave us a bunch of reports that were all due this week aaagh! Stress! I've got exams at the moment too. Given that, I won't be updating until all of them are over, which is the



20th of November (counting down the days, woohoo!). It's not that far away.

After that, I'll go back to updating at least once a week, probably even more often, like when I started.

I am NOT liking the new layout on the website... it's confusing and not as good as before.

Anyway, hope this chappie was good. I'm going to bed because I am TIRED.

Please review!

REVIEWERS : ): ): ): ): )

I love my reviewers. Now up to 150 reviews!  
Thankyouthankyouthankyou everyone

I usually reply individually, but I sort of lost track of who I had and hadn't replied to, so if I missed you (which is probably nearly everyone), then I'm really sorry. Not sorry however, if I replied more than once.

Thanks to:

fhippogriff

nxkris

Aria Dragoncrest

ben, ben, ben (who doesn't seem to like the story but continues to waste his time reading it)

nadapotter

Jensindenial3516

eric

x Alice and Rosalie 4 Eva x

jjack0310!!! The 150th reviewer!!! Clap for jack

Prehistoric, perhaps?

It was Sunday, and Harry was sitting in Snape's office for his second Legilimency lesson. He'd spent the day mucking around with his friends and gorging on all the Honeydukes products they had bought in Hogsmeade, and the fact that he had a Legilimency lesson put something of a dampener on his mood, especially when he recalled the first one. He hadn't managed to accomplish the spell, even when Snape had completely dropped his defences, and that hadn't given him much hope or Snape much patience.

He hoped to do better tonight, but if he was honest with himself, he hadn't practiced at all since his last lesson. It had only been a few days ago, but his mind had been on other things. He knew however, that he needed to learn it. His visions of Voldemort had been getting more and more vivid as he had progressed at Occlumency, and he was sick of sleepless nights.

Snape put down his quill and sealed the letter he had been writing with wax, before tucking it into the top drawer of his desk and turning to face Harry across the desk, a resigned expression on his face. "Seeing as you were completely inept in our previous session, we shall start out simple." He sneered before continuing. "I will completely drop my shields and you will once again attempt to penetrate my mind. Before you attempt the spell however, I will perform the spell on you. I don't want you to resist me, rather I want you to let me in and just concentrate on my presence, what it feels like, the images it conjures for you. Understood?"

"Yes sir." He wondered what the point of this was, but didn't ask. Instead, he cleared his mind and dropped his shield of darkness. To his surprise, it was somewhat disconcerting to feel that his mind suddenly vulnerable after so many weeks of constant shielding. He nodded at Snape to let him know he was ready.

"Legilimens."

Harry immediately felt Snape's presence in his mind, and did as he was told, focussing on how it felt. The presence was intrinsically Snape, but he had never thought before about what actually made

the presence so Snape. Now that he thought about it, the presence was... black. Not just black, but dark, it felt dark. It was hard to explain, but even though he knew it was only mental, he could detect a sort of texture to the presence, an oily, slippery sort of feel. He withheld a mental snort. If there was one word anyone would use to describe Snape, it was oily.

Snape appeared to have detected this errant thought, because Harry heard an impatient mental huff. He returned his focus to the task at hand. As he opened his mind to the presence, he noted something disturbing. Snape's presence was familiar, comfortable. The realisation shocked him. The first time he had detested Snape's presence in his mind it had been alarming, uncomfortable and intrusive. Now however, it felt safe, something which disturbed him.

Suddenly, the presence withdrew and Harry was alone with his thoughts. Snape cleared his throat, pulling Harry's attention back to him. "Now, Potter, when you perform the spell you need to imagine you are already in my mind, as you were doing in your previous lesson. I want you to remember the... characteristics, if you will, of my mind. However, do not picture those distinct traits as you saw them in your mind; there you were outside of it. Instead, surround yourself with them. Hopefully this will aid you in imagining that you are already in my mind.

Harry frowned thoughtfully. It made sense, and it wouldn't be too hard to surround himself with that blackness that had felt strangely familiar and safe. After all, his own shields were of blackness, the familiar blackness of his cupboard where he had felt safe. All he had to do was make the darkness more liquid and oily than empty space, and perhaps, he thought, incorporate a sense of superiority and sarcasm.

Pulling his wand out of his sleeve, he pointed it at Snape and incanted the spell in a determined voice, all the while recalling the way Snape's mind felt. "Legilimens!"

...

He blinked stupidly, and Snape gave his usual sneer. "Again."

Harry sighed. This was exactly how the last lesson had started.  
“Legilimens!”

Again he was left feeling silly, but he also felt the strange sensation that part of him was pushing against a thin, invisible barrier. He supposed that was progress; last time it had taken him many attempts before he had felt that.

“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“You said you had no shields up, but I can feel something stopping me.”

“I see.” Snape surveyed him, a finger tapping lightly on his thin lips. “This indicates that you are doing the right thing, at least. You are pushing your mind outwards to meet mine, you simply do not have enough power or focus behind the spell yet. The resistance you are meeting is my mind’s subconscious defences.”

He vaguely recalled Snape mentioning that even Harry had weak natural defences in an Occlumency lesson.

“I cannot take down those barriers, but the fact that you are detecting them is a good sign. I believe the best way to proceed is to continue in this manner. Practise makes perfect, after all.”

Reigning in a sigh of frustration, Harry again pointed his wand at Snape’s head. It was going to be a long night.

...

Forty minutes, sixteen sarcastic remarks and a pounding headache later, he was ready to quit. He had made no further progress and Snape was becoming increasingly impatient.

“Well how long did it take you to learn this stuff?” Harry cried when Snape made yet another insulting remark about his sub-standard

intellect. "You can't expect me to pick it up like that," he said, snapping his fingers in Snape's face.

The Potions Master raised an eyebrow, fixing Harry with a somewhat amused stare. "I, Mr. Potter, pride myself on having great control of my mind. As such, I became adept at these skills in a relatively short amount of time. Still, it took me years to become a master in both arts, and there is always room for improvement. That said, I do not expect you to progress at the same rate. I do however expect that by two lessons time you will be able to penetrate my mind. That is your goal. So, you will practice in your own time, and if you do not achieve your goal, I shall be severely displeased."

Harry swallowed, his throat dry. He was about to reply when suddenly the fire in the hearth roared and turned green. As Harry watched, Dumbledore's head appeared in the flames. "Aah, Harry. How are you doing this evening?"

"Fine, sir."

"Excellent, and how are your lessons coming along? Professor Snape mentioned that he has begun teaching you Legilimency. I must say, quite impressive. I did not imagine you would become proficient at Occlumency quite as fast as you did."

Harry didn't know how to react to this; Snape had seemed to expected that Harry would have done it sooner than he had. Either that or the man was just an impatient git. Hm. He was that.

"Umm... thank you sir. Lessons are going well." He ignored Snape's quiet snort.

"Excellent, excellent," murmured Dumbledore, turning his attention to the Potions Master. "Severus, we are in need of your company. How long do you anticipate we will be waiting?"

"Moments, Headmaster. Potter and I were just finishing."

"Excellent, excellent," said Dumbledore yet again, and his head disappeared from the fireplace.

“Well, Potter, off you go, and remember what I said. You now have a specific goal to work towards. I expect to see results.”

With that, Snape ushered Harry out of the office and in to the dank corridor. “I shall accompany you up to Gryffindor Tower. Be sure to clear your mind before sleep.”

“Yes sir.”

As he followed behind Snape, he thought it odd that Snape was dropping him off. It was on the way to Dumbledore’s office, though it wasn’t the most direct route. He came to the conclusion that there was an Order meeting; Snape was on his way there and whoever would usually be following him, Tonks or Owens, was there already. Leaving Snape to be his temporary babysitter, he thought moodily.

Snape left him at the portrait hole without a word and Harry clambered in. The fire was low and there were only a few people still scattered about the room, despite the fact that it was only an hour past curfew. He was surprised not to see Ron and Hermione; they, and sometimes Pandora, usually waited up for him.

He didn’t really care tonight; it would make it easier to slip away. Despite the fact that all he wanted to do was crash, he was determined to find out as much as he could about what Voldemort was up to, and he couldn’t pass up the chance to sit in on an Order meeting.

At the top of the stairs, instead of heading in to the boys’ dorm, he ducked into the dark bathroom and wrestled his invisibility cloak out of a pocket of his robes.

After covering himself, he stepped back onto the landing. He had hardly used the passage that led from the Gryffindor Common Room to the Chamber, but he did now. Hissing the command, he watched as the floor dissolved, revealing the stone steps.

As he descended the stairs, he pondered on the Legilimency lesson. It had been strange to recognise Snape’s mind as a calming and

familiar thing, and the thoughts troubled him. It was hard to associate Snape with the cool presence that was Snape's mind. Shaking his head, he continued on down the passage.

He figured he had about ten minutes, he doubted whether Dumbledore would start the meeting without Snape. He picked up his pace a bit, and then decided that the fast walk wasn't doing his headache any good. He didn't even bother to pull the Pendant out. He felt the Snake begin to slither faster, as if it knew that he wanted to be somewhere else. He pictured the waterfall painting and the snake really came to life, writhing in the familiar pattern on his chest as the Pendant grew warm.

Instantly, he was standing in front of the painting. He shivered as he stepped through the frigid water and moved into the world of paintings. A minute later, he was sitting in the shade of a large oak tree, by the Black Lake. The painting he was in was his usual one, looking down upon Dumbledore's office. It was an excellent vantage point; he could see everyone in the room.

At that moment, the door slid open and Snape swept in, nodding shortly in response to a few 'hellos.' He strode to the back of the room, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms. It was obviously not a full Order meeting; there was less than ten people in the room, all of whom Harry recognised. All of them were either his teachers (McGonagall, Snape and Flitwick), aurors (Owens, Tonks and Moody, Kingsley), and Mr. Weasley.

This was the group which, along with Mrs. Weasley, Remus and perhaps a few others, he had come to call the Order's Inner Circle. He had cringed the first time he had thought that; after all, it was a term he associated with the Death Eaters, but the fact was that this group was exactly that, only the good guys, and he had been unable to come up with another name that fit so well.

"Severus, thank you for joining us so quickly. We have much to discuss tonight."

Snape nodded briefly.



"I trust Harry got off to his dormitory safely?"

"Of course, Albus."

"Excellent. Severus has been instructing young Harry privately," Dumbledore informed the room at large, and Harry frowned. He wasn't sure Dumbledore should be telling everyone that, but he supposed there was no one in this room he didn't trust. The only person he didn't really know was Owens, and he found it impossible to think of the jolly young Irishman as anything other than friendly and loyal.

"What sort of instruction?" asked Moody gruffly, his magical eye whizzing madly around before turning backwards in his head and settling abruptly on Snape.

Dumbledore waved a hand vaguely. "Oh, this and that." Harry sighed, he felt better knowing that they didn't know exactly what he was learning. After all, if Voldemort should find out that Snape was an Occlumens, it would undoubtedly cause trouble.

"You made sure he got back to the common room?" asked Owens, and Snape raised an amused eyebrow. "Of course. I can assure you he did not suddenly disappear as we turned a corner or any other such nonsense." To Harry's surprise, his tone was not biting or sarcastic, merely amused. Even so, Owens blushed and Tonks scowled. At the same time, Harry could have laughed. He wondered what Snape would say if he knew Harry was not right now tucked safely and snugly into his bed as he clearly thought.

"Yes, he is an elusive young man, isn't he," commented Dumbledore.

"Perhaps you should relieve him of that invisibility cloak Albus. Damned thing is more trouble than it's worth," growled Moody.

Snape gave a snort, and Harry could just imagine that he was thinking something along the lines of 'like that would do any good. The boy will simply steal it back.'

The twinkle in Dumbledore's eye showed that he understood the meaning behind Snape's snort as well. He stroked his beard. "Perhaps, though I think that will be difficult. He has warded his trunk quite effectively. That said, we shall move on to other business. Severus, how is your search coming for any sign of an attack?"

Snape grimaced. "I have no specific news," he admitted, the reluctance and regret in his tone evident. "He has not approached me, nor any other members of his Inner Circle, so far as I can tell. I have been trying to glean information from members of the lower ranks, but it is difficult when I do not know even their identities. I am rarely called to meetings with lower members, and when I am, I am usually called on to stay behind. Perhaps the aurors have heard something?" Snape added, turning to Kingsley.

"I have information, though I don't believe it will help us at all. I tried to talk with Moody to relay this information sooner, but it is unsafe to talk within the walls of the Ministry. Indeed, it is unsafe to talk anywhere but the most secure locations. After all, the walls have ears."

"And eyes," added Moody. Harry smirked to himself. Oh, if only they knew, he thought smugly.

"Last week we caught a Death Eater, freshly marked. Under Veritaserum, he claimed to be a part of the group that was in the first attack of You-Know-Who's to flush out the spy. Of course, he had no idea that that was the purpose of the mission, and neither does the Ministry. That said, he was unable to name even one other Death Eater, or provide any information otherwise."

"Damn," murmured Tonks, and several members in the room grumbled their agreement.

"Quite," agrees Kingsley. "All in all, his questioning led absolutely nowhere."

"What was the fellow's name?" asked McGonagall.

"Kevin Rudd."

“Really! I believe I remember him, mousy little fellow with glasses, his family owned a Mandarin farm?”

Kingsley nodded. “Yes, though they ran it into debt years ago, had to sell.”

“Yes, well interesting as his family’s economic history is,” ground Snape through clenched teeth, “I think the more pertinent issue is what did you do with him?”

“We released him.” He held up his hands to stall the flurry of outraged remarks that broke out. “Under the Imperius curse.”

“What! Oh my!” gasped McGonagall.

“Come now, Minerva. Surely an experienced and knowledgeable witch such as yourself doesn’t believe that the Ministry is above such behaviour,” said Snape sourly.

Kingsley continued. “We don’t know how much we’ll get from him, but very few people were aware of his capture and we’re only hoping that none of those who were are under You-Know-Who’s influence. Hopefully he’ll relay something useful.”

“The Dark Lord is bound to detect that he is under Imperius. He routinely reads the mind of his follows.”

“That may be so, but to be honest, we have nothing to lose by sending Rudd back in there. He’s been tagged and we can arrest him whenever we want. In the mean time, we hope he will bring us information. We are aware of the risk that You-Know-Who will plant information, so we will treat anything he brings us with extreme caution.”

“I for one think it was an appropriate course of action. Was Cornelius aware of it?” asked Dumbledore.

Kingsley snorted. “Usually we would be required to consult him before releasing a known criminal, but the man is completely inept. He refuses to commit to any plans, offensive or defensive.”

“Well we’ve all known that for some time now,” sniffed McGonagall.

“With any luck we’ll have a new Minister after the next election. Campaigning is only a few months away now,” said Mr. Weasley.

This surprised Harry. He had never considered before the political rules of the wizarding world.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s booted out before then with a vote of no confidence,” stated Kingsley. “Even the public is starting to wonder what he does every day.”

“When are the candidates to be announced?”

“Anytime between the end of next month and the election,” replied Arthur.

“Have we heard any rumour of who will be running?”

Those who worked at the Ministry all shook their heads and Tonks spoke. “No, but I think we can safely assume that You-Know-Who will have a man running. Perhaps... maybe we should have someone in there? Merlin knows what would happen if they had more control of the Ministry than they do already.”

There was a mixed response from the people in the room. “It is something to consider,” Dumbledore responded. “Do you have a suggestion for who might run?”

“I hadn’t thought about it that far,” Tonks replied.

“Perhaps it is something to think about and revisit at our next meeting.”

Murmurs of assent rolled around the room as people got to their feet and began to leave. The office emptied quickly, and as usual, McGonagall and Snape remained behind. It had become clear to Harry that his two teachers were Dumbledore’s most trusted confidants.

“Severus, how is Mr. Potter progressing with his lessons?” asked Professor McGonagall.

“He has made no real progress with Legilimency yet, of course, he has only had two lessons, so I hardly expect much. Legilimency is far more difficult than Occlumency.”

“Hmm... I hope you aren't being too harsh with him, Severus.”

“You needn't worry, Minerva. I am a perfectly capable teacher.”

“I didn't say you weren't capable. I'm simply reminding you to treat Mr. Potter as you would any other student. I know that you tend to be overly aggressive with him.”

“You don't know what you're talking about witch,” snapped Snape.

“I know it frustrates you because he reminds you of-”

“Hush, Minerva, or I am going to get angry.”

McGonagall pursed her lips and gave him a stern glare. “Albus, have you had any luck determining who it was that broke in to your office?”

Dumbledore sighed. “I have not, Minerva. The fact is that my wards were not broken, and yet no one entered through the Gargoyle. It is a worrying problem indeed. Even worse, I have lost one of the only things that Harry has from his father.”

Dumbledore looked truly guilty, and Harry felt a twinge of guilt. Although, he reminded himself, Dumbledore is the one who took it from him in the first place.

“Albus I assure you, Potter has the map. You needn't worry about where it has gone. However, the longer you deliberate about telling him, the more he will distrust you.”

Harry frowned. He hadn't thought about that. Knowing that the Map was safe, he hadn't thought further about Dumbledore telling him

about it. When he thought about it, he heartily agreed with what Snape said.

“That may well be true.” Dumbledore sighed heavily. “I simply cannot fathom how the culprit circumvented my wards. It is highly unlikely that Harry has the knowledge to do so, in fact, very few do.”

“No doubt he has discovered some obscure spell. Either that or his Parseltongue abilities allow him to get around your wards as he did mine.”

“I assure you Severus, my office is amply protected from the usual – and many unusual – threats, including those with the ability to speak Parseltongue.”

Snape scowled at the fact that Dumbledore refused to believe him, and Harry grinned as he saw the Potions Master getting frustrated.

“If you have nothing specific, Albus, I really must be going.”

“Of course, Severus. Good night.”

“I think I will retire also. I have an unending pile of essays to mark,” said McGonagall.

Dumbledore showed them out and Harry made his way back to the waterfall painting and through to the damp passage way. From there he apparated to the top of the stairs in the Common Room and trudged into the dormitory, his mind going over all he had heard.

He got into bed, and remembering his night after the first Occlumency lesson, he made sure to put up a silencing spell around his bed and pull his hangings tight.

oOo

He was relieved he had done so when he woke from a disturbing vision in the early hours of the morning. His Legilimency headache had retreated, only to be replaced with the throbbing pain of his scar

and a raw throat. The vision had been the usual sort; Voldemort torturing some poor victim. The only difference was that he had only had two Death Eaters with him, instead of it being at a meeting or on a raid.

He managed to fall asleep again for a few hours before Seamus' alarm woke him to get ready for classes. He dragged himself out of bed, and went down to breakfast in the clothes he had worn the day before. They were rumpled and if he was honest with himself, they didn't smell the best, but he really couldn't bring himself to care. Hermione however, was on his case.

"Harry, your clothes look terrible! Your robe looks as if it's been bundled up and stuffed under your bed all year!"

"Leave off, 'Mione," said Ron, and Harry was glad to have backup. "We can't all be pretty all the time." Then he blushed and refused to say any more about anyone's state of dress. Thankfully, his comment also made Hermione forget the subject.

Harry snorted into his cereal. Really, he thought. They've been going out for months now, and they're still embarrassed around each other. He shook his head, smiling at their behaviour.

Their first class was defence, and Snape treated them to a lecture on fire curses. Then they had twenty minutes of practicing the shield. He managed to produce a very weak one by the end of the lesson, and to his surprise Pandora produced a very good one after only a few tries. No one else managed even a flicker of a shield.

By lunchtime the pain in his scar had completely faded away and the rest of the day passed happily enough.

oOo

The next day in during Potions they were working on a medicinal elixir called Longhorn's Mix which was predominantly used for treating Spattergroit and related illnesses. It was a difficult potion, requiring much concentration, and the classroom was mostly silent as groups worked at their benches.

Harry and Malfoy were currently nearing the midpoint of the potion, where it was set to stew for twenty minutes. Some groups were getting there too, and whispers were starting to break out around the classroom.

Harry picked up the handful of dried lilac leaves he had just crushed and held them over the potion. They needed to be sprinkled in while the potion was stirred two times clockwise and then sixteen times counter clockwise.

Malfoy picked up their stirring spoon and as soon as he began to stir, Harry sprinkled the handful evenly over the surface until Malfoy had completed the correct number of stirs.

Almost immediately, the Potion turned from beige to pale blue. It was supposed to be more purplish, but Harry thought it was good enough considering the difficulty level of the potion.

He recorded the observation in his book for later use in his report.

He looked over at Malfoy's book. His observations were longer, more detailed, but Harry was at a loss as to what he wrote. He was exactly like Hermione in that regard, his attention to detail was phenomenal.

He looked around the classroom; most of the class was now at the first waiting stage, and everyone was starting to talk.

"Potter."

"Hm?" He turned to face Malfoy and the pale Slytherin leaned closer, dropping his voice.

"Want to go to the Chamber tonight?"

Harry brightened at the idea. It had been a few days since they had been, and he would like a break from the rowdiness of the common room. "Alright. I'll meet you at Myrtle's after dinner."



“Will it take you long to get away from your babysitter?” asked Malfoy, a smirk on his lips.

Harry scowled at the term. “I have an idea for that. You know that really narrow passage on the second floor, beside the statue of Bannok?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s too narrow for two people to pass each other. If you wait at the far end for me to come through, then you go through the other way, anyone following me will either have to go back or reveal themselves. Either way, you’ll stall them long enough for me to disappear.”

“So now I’m being dragged in to your rebellious endeavours?” He rolled his eyes theatrically, but didn’t complain, so Harry assumed he would do it.

“I’ll watch for you to leave the Great Hall, and wait a few minutes before I follow you.”

Just then, Snape swept over and peered down at their potion. “Not the usual standard,” was his only comment before he moved on to the next group. Harry was secretly delighted that Snape couldn’t criticise his potion without criticising Malfoy’s.

A few minutes later, the stewing time ended and they went back to work. Everyone was working until after the bell for lunch went, except for Hermione and her partner who managed to finish on time.

The elixir needed to stew again, this time for twenty-four hours. After that it needed to be taken off the heat and cooled, so they would need to come back at some stage tomorrow to do that. They ended up being twenty minutes late for lunch, but their potion was still looking good, for which Harry was relieved.

...

That night towards the end of dinner, Harry started keeping an eye on the Slytherin table, waiting for Malfoy to leave. The boy took his time,

and Harry was starting to get impatient when Malfoy finally stood and strode from the Great Hall.

As he had promised, he waited several minutes before grabbing his bag. Ron, Hermione and Pandora were still at the table, and he had the feeling they were just waiting for him to finish. He was proved correct when he stood up and they followed suit.

He said nothing as they walked through the Entrance Hall and up the stairs to the first floor. "Guys, I just need to go see Dumbledore for a minute. I'll see you back in the common room."

Hermione smiled brightly; Harry had known any explanation involving Dumbledore would sit just fine with the three of them. They were still suspicious of where he disappeared to, and always reluctant to let him go off alone, though they didn't push him for fear of another argument breaking out.

"I might stop by the library on the way back. See you later." At that, Hermione pursed her lips, exchanging a look with Pandora. Ron just looked resigned. He turned and walked in the opposite direction to the next set of staircases and up to the second floor. At the top of the stairs he ducked in to the hidden passage he had arranged to meet Malfoy at and sped along the length. At the far end, he slowed down a bit. The passage was quite dark, and he pulled his invisibility cloak out before stepping into the corridor.

Malfoy was waiting just as they had arranged, and he gave Harry a rough push as he passed. Rolling his eyes, Harry pulled on the cloak and started towards Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Behind him, he heard the sounds of a quiet scuffle. He smirked. At least now Malfoy would really believe that he was being followed.

Five minutes later he was walked through the door into the bathroom, surprised to find Malfoy had beaten him there. "That was quick!"

Malfoy shrugged and provided no explanation as Harry opened the entrance and started down the steps.

"You know, I thought you being an idiot when you said you that they'd had put aurors on you, but you were telling the truth. You aren't paranoid after all."

"Of course I'm not paranoid."

"Yes, well. It was that auror Owens, one of the ones Dumbles introduced earlier in the year."

Harry froze. "You saw him?" He didn't want Malfoy revealing to his father anyone working for the Order.

"No. Heard him. He was swearing like nothing else when he couldn't get past me. Colourful fellow."

"You can't be sure it was him then. Owens is a Ministry Auror anyway."

"Maybe Dumbledore isn't the only one having you followed, then. Maybe the Ministry is too."

Harry changed the subject. "Yeah, well. Fudge is an idiot."

Malfoy snorted. "No arguments there. Just a few more months and there'll be a new Minister in office, one that's much more in touch with what the Wizarding World needs."

Harry had a feeling they would disagree on anything the other had to say about that subject, so he didn't reply.

"I see you bought new shoes."

Harry looked down at the comfortable leather shoes. "Oh, yeah. Thanks by the way, for getting the money for me."

"Just remember to take them off before we practice tonight. Have you had any other changes since the feet?"

He shook his head. "No, I've been practising though. You?"

Malfoy shook his head as they stepped in to the library. They both settle down, Harry taking off his shoes first.

Silence descended on the Chamber as they both cleared their minds, and after a while Harry started on the Animagus practice. Very quickly, he felt his teeth, tongue, and feet begin to tingle. He focussed on the feeling, trying to extend it to other parts of his body.

He was rewarded when a half hour later both his arms started to tingle. He snapped his eyes open, and with the loss of concentration, the feeling stopped. Grumbling to himself, he slipped back into the relaxed state, and after a while the tingling in his arms began again. He was careful this time not to feel surprised, to continue focussing on the feeling.

A few moments passed and the sensation stopped, and he opened his eyes, grinning in triumph. Just then, he heard a small gasp and he looked up at Malfoy. The usual scales and spikes and horns were already there, but as he watched, Malfoy seemed to grow before his eyes.

Harry jumped up and moved closer, quietly so as not to distract Malfoy. Seconds later, Malfoy's eyes snapped open, revealing the sharp orange irises.

Despite the fearsome look it gave him, Harry couldn't help but laugh as he looked down at the Slytherin. Malfoy's triumphant look disappeared and he glared at Harry. "What?"

"Your robes!" Harry chuckled. Malfoy had grown, and his robes were now exceedingly tight, stretched across his torso and looking like they would rip any second.

"It's not that funny Potter."

"It looks like a dress!"

Malfoy jumped to his feet, scowling. His menacing expression wasn't enough to stop Harry's laughter when a loud ripping sound was heard.

“My shirt,” muttered Malfoy, and then he was laughing too.

After a minute, Harry could look at Malfoy without laughing. The Slytherin had grown about a foot.

“Shite, Potter, you’re short!”

Harry scowled, not liking being reminded of the fact. Malfoy suddenly gave him an odd look, and sniggered. “What?”

“You changed too.”

“Oh, yeah.” His change wasn’t as impressive as Malfoy’s, in fact it was quite the opposite. His arms had shrunk. He lifted them to get a better look and found that he couldn’t lift them above chest height. He studied them; his skin had changed, it appeared rougher, and the colour was darker, tinged green.

“You look ridiculous with those tiny little arms. I bet you would hardly be able to wrap your fingers around one of mine.”

Harry was going to argue, but after looking dubiously at Malfoy’s enlarged hands he had to agree – he probably couldn’t.

“What do you think I am?” he asked.

Malfoy frowned thoughtfully. “I really don’t know. You’ve got those weird feet with the spike, but your arms are really tiny. Sharp teeth, so you eat meat, you’re a predator of some sort I would say...”

This appeased Harry somewhat. The tiny arms had made him think he was a weak sort of animal, but Malfoy was right. With teeth like his he was definitely a predator. “Maybe a bird of some sort?”

“There aren’t many birds with teeth... some magical ones. I suppose it’s possible.”

Harry’s eyes lit up. Maybe I’m a dinosaur!”

Malfoy burst out in laughter.

“What!? It’s possible. They used to exist. There’s no reason I wouldn’t be one.”

“Sorry, sorry. The idea just surprised me. It is more likely than you being a magical creature.” After all, magical animagi are extremely rare.” He puffed up proudly.

He quite liked the idea of being a dinosaur. Maybe a T-Rex, or...no! A raptor! He grinned widely. Yes, a raptor would be very nice. Speed, agility, teeth that could tear through flesh like it was sponge cake...

“What are you smiling about?”

“Just thinking.”

Malfoy looked at him for a second, but with his new features, Harry couldn’t tell exactly what kind of look it is. “You really like the idea of being a dinosaur, don’t you?”

“Yes! It would be excellent!”

Malfoy shook his head, chuckling. “Like a little child.”

Harry would have scowled, but he was too happy at his transformation and thoughts of what his form might be to be offended by Malfoy’s remark.

Harry glanced at his watch, only to find that it had slipped off his tiny arm. He looked around and saw it lying on the floor. As he walked over, he transformed back to his human form. He undid the band and put it back on. They had only been here an hour. It was definitely getting easier the more they practiced.

He flopped down on the lounge. “Hey, Malfoy?”

“Yeah?” The Slytherin was standing admiring himself in the mirror, standing several feet back just to see all of himself in the full length mirror.

“Can you teach me Legilimency?”

Malfoy’s reply came instantly. “No.”

Harry sat up. “Why not? You helped me with Occlumency.”

“That was when I benefited from it. It helped me with my Legilimency. Severus has already taught me Occlumency, so there’s no benefit I would get from helping you. Besides that, there’s no way I’d even consider letting you in my head.”

“I let you in mine.”

“That was your decision. This is mine.”

Harry scowled. “Come on, I really want to learn it.”

“I don’t care what you want,” he replied, finally turning from the mirror. As he did so the fabric of his robe finally ripped across the chest, revealing the white shirt beneath. The Slytherin shrunk back to his normal size and sat down at the other end of the lounge.

“Remember our deal, Malfoy. I wouldn’t tell anyone anything I saw in your head. Plus, if Snape’s already taught you Occlumency you should be able to direct my thoughts.”

“I’m not that good. I can block people out and throw them out, but I can’t direct thoughts. I don’t have that much control. Severus is still teaching me. You would see whatever you happen to see. So no.”

They lapsed into silence. Harry was irked by Malfoy’s stubbornness. He knew he wasn’t going to get anywhere by asking nicely.

“You know,” he began slowly, looking up at the high ceiling, “It would be a shame to never be able to come back here... to be locked out with no way in... I’d hate it.”

In his peripheral vision, he saw Malfoy’s head whip around. “Yes... I’d really miss this place,” he continued. “The peace and quiet, the books, all this knowledge and power...”

“Fine!”

Harry smirked. That line of ‘reasoning’ had worked out better and quicker than he’d thought.

“Fine, I’ll do it, but you can’t break our deal.”

“Hmm, it seems Malfoy’s respond well to blackmail. I’ll have to remember that.”

...

Harry was on his way back to the common room when he heard whispering. Stopping, he tilted his head to the side and listened. Voices were coming from an unused classroom near where they had transfiguration. Shrugging, he started walking again when he heard his name. At least, he thought he heard his name. Moving closer to the door, he listened again and was surprised to detect Ron’s voice.

“Harry... ate.....nest....”

“....ont to on.....”

“...tell him.... he’d... us too.”

“I.... Ron, but.... heard what...or Ed...not to.”

Harry frowned and strained to hear them better. Who was Ed?

He heard a frustrated sigh, followed by Ron speaking, no longer whispering. “Look, let’s just go back to the common room. Maybe Harry’s back now. Have you done your Transfiguration essay yet?”

“Of course I have Ron. It’s due tomorrow.”

“Great! You can check mine over for me.”

“And by check over, do you mean read through, or write it for you.”



“Come on Mione! What kind of person do you think I am?”

Harry backed away from the door as the voices got closer and walked quickly away. What could Hermione and Ron have been talking about? They clearly disagreed about something, and it was to do with him.

Finding an empty table in the common room, he pulled out some homework, just as Ron and Hermione came in through the portrait hole. He waved them over and Hermione smiled at him. He wasn't sure, but he thought she gave Ron a warning look before she ran over and took the seat beside him.

“Harry! Ron and I were looking for you.”

“As usual,” grumbled Ron.

“You know you don't have to go looking for me every time I want some time alone.”

“Don't worry about Ron. He's just in a mood because I told him he has to try writing his own essay before I do it for him.”

Harry smiled at Ron. “I sympathise with you, mate.”

Ron looked up, a hopeful look in his eye. “Have you done transfiguration yet?”

Harry held up the parchment he was writing on, displaying all three sentences he had written. “What you see is what I've got. Sorry mate.”

Ron let out a mournful cry and cradled his head in his hands. Harry reached over and gave him a slap on the back. “Don't worry. At least you aren't the only one who's going to be up all night.”

Hermione tisked. “Harry, I thought you had become more organised!”

He grinned ruefully. “I'm allowed to slack off occasionally aren't I?”

Hermione shook her head and opened a thick book.

“So where’s Pandora?” asked Harry. It was rare to not sitting with them in the evenings.

“Library,” said Hermione shortly.

“Oh. She’d better get back here soon. It’s nearly curfew.”

“I’m sure she’ll make it.”

“Hm.” Not able to forget the whispered conversation he had half overheard, he decided to ask, “Is there anything you two want to tell me before she gets back?”

He looked up when a silence greeted his words. Hermione and Ron were both staring at him, Ron’s eyes slightly wide. Harry raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“What do you.. ah.. mean?” asked Ron.

He shrugged nonchalantly, leaning against the backrest. “I just mean, is there anything you need to tell me?”

“About what, Harry?” asked Hermione quietly.

“About anything.”

Hermione eyed him carefully, as though trying to determine what he wanted to hear. “I can’t think of anything...” She shook her head, doing a very good job of looking innocent.

Harry pondered silently. Perhaps what he had heard was unimportant, or had nothing to do with him.

“Ron?”

“Umm...”

Just then, the portrait hole banged open and Pandora came in, effectively ending the conversation. He would have to follow that up another time.

oOo

A decent chapter for you all. Hope you all enjoyed it. I'm on holidays now (YAY!) so updates will be every few days, hopefully. Please please review. It gives me reason to write. (I would anyway, but I always feel really enthusiastic after reading some good reviews). A challenge, perhaps? The record number of reviews for a chapter is 23. Can we beat it???

Thanks to chapter 24 reviewers:

Befread Di

Jensindenial3516 ams71080

fhippogriff lirica

nxkris Junky

Vanessa riddle ZHYLOSA

## Too Close to Home

On Wednesday night Harry had a Legilimency lesson. He traipsed down to Snape's office, hoping he would make some progress tonight.

"Do you recall, Potter, when I said we would continue to study Occlumency?" At Harry's nod he continued. "We will not spend a great deal of time on it, but it would be beneficial to strengthen your shields to a point where an enemy cannot access your thoughts at all. We have ascertained that you can throw one out, but it would be better if they could not get in at all."

"Is that what you do sir?"

"On occasion. Normally however, I project trivial thoughts, memories which do not provide the information the attacker seeks."

"You mean Voldemort?"

Snape hissed through his teeth, but continued. "Usually, yes. It would not do for him to know that I am blocking my thoughts from him. He trusts me, so often it is not an issue, but sometimes if he wishes to clearly and fully understand something, it is easiest to simply view the memory. Instead of blocking him out, I only block certain thoughts, and leave all else in the open."

"Wouldn't it be better if I could do that too?"

"It takes years to gain that level of control, to make it so an attacker does not even realise there is a barrier stopping them from accessing all of your thoughts. It takes even longer to be able to direct memories in such a way that it seems natural to the person viewing them. Anyway, the point of these lessons is to prevent your visions, not prepare you to face a master Legilimens."

Harry was disappointed, but he nodded in understanding.

"But we digress. My point is that we will continue to practice Occlumency, to make your shields stronger. For the most part though, we will be focussing on Legilimency." Snape took his seat and looked

at him across the desk. "Now, since we have not yet had any luck, we are going to try something slightly different. I wonder... do you recall when I was teaching you Occlumency and at one point I asked you to let me into your mind to wander freely, so that you would know how it felt? We shall try something similar. Stand up."

Harry did so, and Snape stood as well, moving out from behind the desk to stand in the open space in front of it.

"What we are going to do is allow you to see what it feels like to penetrate another's mind, without you actually doing the spell."

"How do we do that, sir?"

"I will cast the spell. You will cast a shield spell."

"Shield spell?" he repeated, confused. Then realisation dawned on him. "Oh! Protego, so the spell reflects back to you! That will work?"

"Obviously, or I would not have suggested it."

Harry raised his wand and performed the spell, a transparent golden shield erupting in front of him, forming an iridescent and roughly circular barrier between him and Snape. The Potions Master incanted the spell, not even raising his wand.

"Legilimens."

Harry felt the spell hit his shield, weakening it. A split second later however, he could no longer see the shield, or Snape, or Snape's office. He felt an odd sort of feeling, like a mental tug crossed with a mental push, and all of a sudden he was assaulted by images rushing past him at a rapid speed, so fast he could not distinguish any specific image. Flashes of colour and sound and smell reached him, only to be ripped away and replaced by others. Light, dark, sadness, green, pain, red, lavender, blue, envy, yellow, fear, happiness, mud, seawater, pride. The only emotion that was his was the confusion as he was overwhelmed by so many different and contrasting things so quickly. If he could just slow it all down...

And all of a sudden it was. Instead of a myriad of indistinguishable sensations, he was standing in a yard. The ground beneath his feet was covered with a thin layer of mud and ratty grass. An old wooden fence ran the perimeter of the yard, mouldy and failing in some places, it was just over two metres tall. The side he was facing had a gate standing ajar, and threw the small gap he could see more muddy earth. In the distance, factories pumped smoke into the grey sky.

All in all, it was a thoroughly miserable place.

He turned and saw an old house. It was one story, and in the failing light it, like everything else in this dismal scene, was grey, leached of colour.

What caught Harry's attention most however, was not the house, but the person in front of it. Kneeling, and facing at an angle to the wall was a tall lanky boy with jet black hair. Harry couldn't see what he was doing, but he knew immediately that it was Snape.

He started to walk closer to investigate, but he blinked, and when he opened his eyes he was no longer in the drab yard, but back in Snape's office, and the Potion's Master was staring at him with a look akin to shock on his face.

A second later however, Harry was unsure that he had seen it, for Snape's face was again the usual stoic mask.

"How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Slow down the rush of memories like that."

Harry shrugged. He wasn't sure how he had done it. "It was all just so confusing. I just wanted it all to stop."

The corner of Snape's mouth quirked downwards. "Again. Try and do it again."

Harry shrugged again and performed the shield spell, and Snape spoke the spell. "Legilimens."

Again, Harry was torn from the office, he could no longer feel his feet on that constant surface. For the smallest amount of time, he felt stone, then grass, then sand, his feet sinking or stopping depending on the surface. It was the oddest feeling. Like the first time, he quickly became confused and overwhelmed, though not as much now that he had experienced the intense feelings before.

Still, he wanted it to stop, to slow down. However, no matter how much he thought 'Stop!' or 'Slow down!' nothing did. Eventually, He felt a mental push and his physical body rocked backwards, falling to the stone floor.

"Ow!"

"A fluke then," Snape murmured, and his tone sounded satisfied. "Get up, Potter."

Harry got up, rubbing his hip, and resumed his seat when he saw that Snape had done so.

"I must admit, I was not expecting that. You demonstrated control of my memories, slowing them down like that. However, given that you could not do it again, it would seem it was not so much conscious will power as subconscious, your panic over-rode your thought and instinct took over. With practice you will be able to do that at will."

"Was that your house?"

"Yes," replied Snape shortly. "Now, you now know what it feels like to be in my mind. You need to remember that, as well as the sensation of actually entering my mind when you incant the spell."

"Yes Professor." He pointed his wand and fixed the strange sensation of being in Snape's mind in his own before he cast the spell. "Legilimens."

Nothing. This failure was more disappointing than the others; he had been expecting that he would be able to do it.

“Practice, Potter. That is all it takes.”

Harry nodded, and tried again.

...

He got back to the common room just after curfew. He groaned when he saw Pandora sitting with Ron and Hermione. He had assumed she would be there, she was fairly well a part of the group now, but he was still annoyed. He missed when he could come back and complain to Ron and Hermione about the evil Potions Master and the draining lessons. With Pandora there, he couldn't say anything.

It made him feel a bit guilty; it wasn't that he didn't like her, it was just that it had always been the three of them, him Ron and Hermione, the Golden Trio. Things just weren't the same as they used to be.

He spotted Ginny, curled in an armchair by the fire, and changed his course. “Hey Ginny,” he said, flopping down in the chair next to her.

She gave him a warm smile. “Hey Harry.”

“It feels like ages since I've talked to you.”

Ginny closed her book and adjusted herself in the seat so that she was better facing him. “It does, doesn't it? How are you?”

Harry wrinkled his nose. “At the moment – completely worn out. In general... I'm actually really good.”

Ginny smiled again. “I'm glad. It's good to see you happy, Harry. You deserve it.”

“You too Gin. If not for everything you've done for me, then for everything else. You've always been there when I need you.”

“Well, almost always. I kind of ditched you a few months back.”



Harry smiled. "Ah well, so did everyone else. I was a bit of a shite, especially to Ron. I wouldn't expect you not to side with your brother."

"Well, I do know that he wasn't exactly the angel of innocence either. Anyway, why so sentimental tonight?"

Harry chuckled. "Snape wore me out. I'm completely exhausted and spouting 'inane idiocies,' I suppose he would say."

Ginny giggled.

"Don't worry. I'll be fine in the morning. All I need is a good night's sleep. Speaking of which, my pillow is calling to me. Night Gin."

"Goodnight Harry."

oOo

Surprisingly, Harry had slept well after the Legilimency lesson, and he woke refreshed. He was disappointed that he had not managed to get inside Snape's head, and realised he only had until Sunday afternoon to achieve his goal. He was going to have to practice hard. He knew exactly who was going to help him.

In Potions, they handed in their vial of Longhorn's Mix that they had bottle the day before. It was not exactly the pale purple it was supposed to be, rather it was mauve, but it was close enough that he was sure their mark would probably be an E, certainly no lower than an A.

AT the end of class as everyone was packing up, Harry leaned over to Malfoy. "Chamber tonight. I want to start Legilimency."

Malfoy gave him a foul look and stalked out of the room, but Harry was sure he would be there, Just as when he had wanted Malfoy to help him with Occlumency, he knew Malfoy would help him with this. The Chamber of Secrets was too great a treasure to give up.

So it was that after dinner he was seated at the low wooden table with Malfoy across from him, still glaring at Harry. The look seemed to be permanently pasted on his pale face.

“I’ve already practiced a bit, but it’s really the kind of thing you need someone else for, don’t you think?” he began, trying to get Malfoy in a calmer frame of mind.

It didn’t work. “Whatever, Potter,” the Slytherin spat. “You wanted me to help, so I talk, you listen.” Malfoy then proceeded to give Harry much the same run down that Snape had, finishing by saying that they would try first with all of Malfoy’s defences lowered.

Harry smiled mentally, careful not to let any hint of the smile reach his lips lest Malfoy explode. He really was in a bad mood.

Harry pointed his wand at Malfoy. “Legilimens!”

Nothing happened the first time, or the second or third either, but on the fourth try Harry felt the strange mental push and he was suddenly no longer in the chamber. He was surrounded by a myriad of sounds and emotions and snippets of sight. He was looking out of the Black Lake, he was sitting in the Slytherin Common Room, he was in a huge room surrounded by a range of different objects - books and cages and Fanged Frisbees – he was reaching for the handle of a dark Mahogany cupboard, anticipation curling in his gut.

The rush of images stopped abruptly and he was standing in a bright white room. The walls, carpet and furniture were mostly all a clean bright white. Dashes of green accented the room; emerald cushions, a plant in the corner, a deep green glass tabletop.

Turning, he saw Malfoy. He looked mostly the same, perhaps a little younger, and he was sitting reading in a low armchair. He and the rest of the room were completely still. All in all, it was a thoroughly boring memory.

He wandered the room for several minutes, wishing something would happen. He was confused. Malfoy had said he couldn’t direct

memories, but he clearly was, otherwise he, Harry, would not be stuck in this one memory.

He tried moving to a different memory, but he really had no idea how. He supposed that was the control that Snape talked about.

After another ten minutes, during which the only movement was the memory Malfoy turning a page of his book, Harry was becoming thoroughly annoyed, and said so. "Malfoy! Let me out now! You've made your point, you don't want to be doing this, I know that!"

Nothing happened.

"This is a waste of both of our time. Don't be so childish."

He rocked back in his chair. Malfoy had pushed him out. Harry scowled. Malfoy was no longer scowling. Obviously he thought he had punished Harry appropriately for making him do this.

"You lied to me!" said Harry accusingly. "You said you weren't good at directing memories."

Malfoy shrugged. "I lied. I'm alright."

"Alright?"

"I have been learning this for years now, you know. I'm much better at Occlumency than I am at Legilimency. Of course, I'm not as good as Severus. I don't think I'll ever be." He smirked. "Better than you though."

"Yeah, yeah," muttered Harry.

Malfoy frowned. "You really must have been practicing though. It took me a number of lessons before I could do what you just did."

Harry shrugged. "I guess I'm just naturally talented," he said in an airy voice, his nose in the air.

“Yeah right,” snorted Malfoy. “More like beginner’s luck.”

oOo

“You go over there by that tree, see there’s a log? You can hide behind that.”

“Okay. You stay here then, and keep a watch that way. I’ll keep an eye the other way and for anyone coming behind you.”

Harry felt two sharp raps on his head. “Not so hard!”

“So sorry.”

“Sure you are.” He shivered as the disillusionment charm rolled over him. Seconds later, Malfoy faded from the head down, leaving a distorted sort of image of the forest behind him in his place. When he moved, the image chased his movements, changing to reflect the right angle. Harry could still see where Malfoy was, but only if he looked really closely or if the other boy moved.

They were in defence, and their strategy had changed slightly over the course of the year. The entire class were all much better duellists now, and most of the class also now realised that the best strategy was to lie in wait for an opponent.

This had led to the problem of a bunch of Hogwarts students all sitting around in bushes waiting for their classmates, who were also sitting in bushes, to happen by.

This week, he and Malfoy were trying something different. They were disguising themselves with the disillusionment charms, and then they would wait ten minutes to see if anyone came along. Then, they would begin to move around the lake until they found someone.

They had already set up a perimeter to alert them if anyone was coming.

Sparks shot into the air over the lake, the signal that they were to begin. Just two minutes later, Harry heard the tell-tale crunch of

leaves. He spotted an opponent through the trees – it was Nott. He and Zabini were one of the teams that gave them the greatest challenge. He made to signal to Malfoy when he realised that the Disillusionment charm meant he couldn't be seen well enough.

He grimaced; they hadn't thought of that. Hoping that Malfoy had also spotted Nott, he kept still and looked for Zabini, scanning the forest carefully. His attention was riveted back to Nott when the boy stopped, crouching beside a tree. As he watched, not glance backwards and to his right. Following his gaze, Harry smiled. Mistake. There was Zabini, looking back at Nott. The Italian gave a short nod and the two moved forward as one.

Just then, a rock cracked against a larger one on the ground. Someone had thrown it, and Harry knew this was Malfoy's signal. Nott was closest to Harry, so he took aim at the boy, who had ducked down and was desperately looking around to see who had thrown the rock.

"Esacia!" he hissed. It was the Parseltongue stunning spell he had learned. He had become proficient in a number of wordless spells, as had the rest of their defence class. His Parseltongue spells however, were quiet enough that it hardly mattered.

Nott dropped like a rock, a second behind Zabini. As Harry watched, Zabini's body floated over to Nott's and settled beside it. Harry shot sparks up in to the air, where they joined the fading sparks that other groups had sent up to alert Snape of a success.

From the looks of it, at least seven other groups had been knocked out.

Following the plan, Harry began moving around the lake, conscious of the slight distortion in space that was Malfoy.

...

Forty minutes later, yellow sparks lit up the sky, signalling that there was only one group left. Harry and Malfoy had just taken out Dean and Seamus, meaning that they were once again the winners.

He let out a yell of triumph and was about to enervate his two dorm mates when he saw something that made his heart stop in his chest.

Death Eaters. He could only see two, creeping silently through the trees. Beside him, he heard Malfoy's breath catch in his throat.

"How did they get through the wards?" breathed Harry, suddenly very aware that it was Malfoy he was standing next to.

No sooner had he spoken then a loud voice sounded across the grounds. "All students are to make their way immediately to the Great Hall. All students to the Great Hall." Dumbledore's voice faded away as Harry wondered what to do. He couldn't just leave Seamus and Dean lying here, but if he enervated them, they were bound to make a noise.

The Death Eaters had paused at the sound of the projected voice, and Harry scanned the woods for signs of any more, desperately hoping there weren't any. His hopes were dashed when he saw two more black cloaked figures moving through the forest.

Malfoy was tracking the Death Eater's progress through the woods with his eyes, the only part of his body that was moving. Harry knew that if they tried to move now that there was a good chance they would be seen. With this in mind, he settled back, keeping an eye on the Death Eaters and waiting for them to pass.

He was extremely unnerved at being in such close proximity to them with Malfoy next to him, but so far the Slytherin had done nothing to attract attention, choosing instead to sit still with an expression on his face that Harry could only call confusion.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief when the Death Eaters passed without seeing them, and just in time. At that moment, the stunning spells placed on Dean and Seamus begun to wear off. Harry quickly cast a silencio on them both, and held a finger up to his lips. They were smart enough not to start making a noise, and he mouthed the words 'Death Eaters' at them.

Seamus shot a worried look in Malfoy's direction and received a sullen sneer in return. Harry cancelled the silencing charm as his dorm mates sat up quietly.

"What should we do?" asked Dean worriedly. "What do you think they want?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know how they even got past the w-" He was cut off as a shrill scream rent the air.

"Lavender!" yelled Seamus, jumping up.

Harry yanked him back down by the front of his robes.

"Are you insane, Finnigan?" hissed Malfoy. "They'll kill you in a second!"

"Bet you'd love that, wouldn't you Malfoy?!"

"Ordinarily I would, yes. Right now however, I'd rather you didn't draw attention to our position!"

"What do you care? Your dad is probably one of those Death Eaters!"

Malfoy smiled dangerously. "Yeah Finnigan, maybe he is, but you know what? I don't think any of them are going to bother looking at faces!"

"Yeah well, lucky you're a Slytherin, isn't it."

"What? You think these people stop to chat?" Malfoy put on a high, mimicking voice. "Oh, excuse me? Just before I kill you, would you mind telling me what house you're in? Only I don't want to kill any Slytherins. Idiot!" Malfoy was glaring at Seamus with a highly contemptuous look on his pale face.

"Just shut up, both of you!" hissed Harry. "Someone's going to hear you!"

"I think they already have," whispered Dean, his voice breaking. Everyone fell silent, and Harry heard the distinct sound of footsteps crunching on dead leaves and sticks, though he couldn't tell what direction the sound had come from. He frowned, turning his head slowly and peering through the branches, trying to find the familiar black robes.

On his third pass, he finally saw two Death Eaters moving quietly through the brush, stopping occasionally to listen. Gripping his wand tightly, he motioned with his head towards the two, and as the four of them listened, one of the robed figures spoke. "You sure you heard something over here?"

"Yes... quiet..."

After a few moments, the first spoke again. "We came in this way; surely someone would have spotted anyone hiding here?"

"I could have sworn..." muttered the other one, sounding unsure now.

"We're wasting time! Let's go. Our Lord said we must be quick. The wards would have alerted Dumbledore, he's probably already called in the Aurors."

Seconds later, both Death Eaters had turned away, and Harry crept forward pointing his wand at the retreating back of one. "I've got the one on the left, you take the other," he murmured quietly.

"Don't expect my help, Potter. If I were you I'd let them get on with whatever it is they're doing, and wait for them to leave."

Harry glared at Malfoy. "Shouldn't have expected anything different, should I?" he hissed angrily.

"No, you shouldn't," said Malfoy in an infuriatingly calm voice as he inspected his fingernails. Harry turned away, disgusted. "Dean, Seamus?"

"I've got him," said Seamus, creeping forward.



"On the count of three, then. One... two... three!" Twin stunners knocked the two men to the ground. They waited with baited breath, but no other Death Eaters came running to investigate.

Harry turned to Seamus and Dean. "I'm going to go and see what happened to Lavender. You guys stay here."

"No! They got Lavender - I'm coming with you," protested Seamus.

"And me," added Dean.

Harry scowled, but they he didn't have time to argue with them, especially since they seemed adamant about helping Lavender. "Fine, stay behind me then."

He moved out from the bushes, leaving Malfoy sitting comfortably against a tree. As they passed the stunned Death Eaters, Harry collected their wands and then bound them. The three of them then crept silently in the direction the scream had come from, keeping an eye out for any more Death Eaters.

A few minutes later, they heard shouts coming from up ahead, and Seamus took off running towards the noise, brandishing his wand. Dean rushed past him after Seamus before Harry realised what they were doing. "Hey, wait! You don't know what's up there!" He jogged after them, quickly getting closer to what seemed to be a duel.

Ahead of him, Seamus dropped abruptly to the ground, hit by what looked like a stunner.

"Shite!" He dove behind a bush, just as a Death Eater stepped in front of Dean and engaged him in a duel. Harry aimed his wand, but Dean was dancing around in between them, and he couldn't get a clear shot. "Damn!" he muttered, and moved quickly forward, keeping low to the ground and out of sight of the wizard duelling Dean. He gradually came around level with the man, and this time his aim was clear.

He stunned the man, just as a yellow beam of light shot straight through Dean's shield and hit him square in the chest. He accio'd the

man's wand, adding it to the ones in his pocket as he darted through the bushes. Before he jumped into the fight, he reapplied the disillusionment charm. They would still be able to see him, but only if they looked carefully.

Then, he snuck around behind a tree and peered in to the clearing. Pandora was there, duelling two Death Eaters at once. He had barely a second to register that she was an excellent duellist before he had to dive out of the way of a pink beam of light.

As he rolled, he caught sight of Parvati and Lavender, stunned and bound on the ground on the other side of the clearing.

"We've got another one!" came the high voice of the masked figure who had tried to stun him. "There – on the ground. He's using some sort of disillusionment charm."

Harry jumped up, facing the Death Eaters. There were four of them against him and Pandora. He dodged a curse and tried to stupefy one, but his aim was off and the spell shot off in to the woods. The second Death Eater took the opportunity to send a spell his way, and Harry felt a sharp sting along his rib cage.

He hastily erected a shield spell, and the first Death Eater's spell was harmlessly deflected, shooting back and hitting its caster. The man gave an angry yell as the spell hit his neck. While his attention was focussed on the angry red boils erupting on his skin, Harry ducked sideways, firing off a quick succession of spells.

The first Death Eater was pelted with rocks, while the second was whipped by a freezing wind. While he had been duelling them, he had forgotten the two Pandora was duelling. One of them shot a spell at Harry, and the beam of yellow light hit him in the chest. At first he felt nothing, but as he was firing another spell, an odd feeling rolled over him, and he realised the disillusionment charm had been broken.

Pandora took down the one that had shot the spell, just as Harry heard a gasp from one of the Death Eaters he was duelling. "It's the Potter boy!"

Pandora turned wide eyes on him. "Harry, get out of here!"

He ignored her, too busy duelling a bulky figure who kept moving behind a tree.

"Harry! There are more Aurors coming, we can handle this!"

"Then we'll leave when they get here! We can't just run away!" he yelled back, not taking his eyes off the Death Eater he was duelling.

Seeing him, the Death Eaters' attack had been invigorated, and they began to duel with renewed fervour.

All of a sudden, he was pushed to the side, a heavy weight falling on top of him. He realised there was a body covering him, holding him down, and a dozen people were streaming in to the clearing.

He recognised the uniform of Ministry Aurors and sighed in relief. The man who had pushed him to the ground was now pulling him up and away from the fight, which looked as if it would be over in about two seconds flat. Harry shook himself free of the grip on his collar in annoyance. "I can walk, you know!"

"No need to be like that, now, Mr. Potter," said the man, now steering him with a hand on his shoulder. "I've been ordered to get you back up to the school, so if you'll just come without a hassle, that would be best for everyone, I think," said the man, as if explaining something to a small child.

Harry scowled at the man's tone. "But there are more than those Death Eaters. There's at least three more lying in the woods, I need to show you!"

"It's all being taken care of. No need for you to worry."

Harry stepped over a fallen log. "But what about Lavender and Parvati? And Dean and Seamus got taken down as well. What if you can't find them?"

“Mr. Potter,” said the man, his tone changing to one of impatience. “We have a Ministry appointed healer on the scene, and over a dozen Aurors who will thoroughly search the scene. Your friends will be fine.”

Harry pursed his lips and stomped out of the forest, the lake coming in to view on their right and the sweeping lawns that led to the castle now ahead of them. He could see figures running out of the forest on the other side of the lake, and from a distance it looked like Justin and Hannah.

There was a group of students huddled around the willow, and Harry could see Snape striding towards them from the opposite direction.

“Er... sir?” he said, addressing the man who was leading him up to the castle. “I think my class is over there.” He pointed at the group of students.

“I have been ordered to take you to the castle. Your friends will be fine. I have already told this to you.”

“Can’t we just go over there on the way. There might be other people that need to be taken to the hospital wing, and Snape’ll need to know that I got out of the forest.”

The man tisked, but they diverted course towards the tree.

“Oh, Harry! You’re okay!” cried Hermione as they approached the tree. She sprung forward and wrapped him in a hug, and he pried her arms away embarrassedly. “I’m fine, Mione.”

She eyed him over, as if to see if he was telling the truth. “You’re bleeding!” she exclaimed. Harry looked down and was surprised to see a cut along his ribs, suddenly remembering when he had been hit. As soon as he was reminded of the gash, it began to sting, and he screwed up his nose. “I’m alright, really. It’s just a little cut.”

“As per usual, Mr. Potter had to play the hero and get involved.”

Harry scowled at Snape's sneering tone, and the auror cleared his throat. "Professor, I have been ordered to escort Potter to the hospital wing. If there are any more students needing to go, I would be happy to take them along."

"No, no one here has been injured. Unlike Potter, they were intelligent enough to stay out of harm's way." Snape was clearly in a foul mood, an ugly scowl planted firmly on his face. "Before you go, however, have you seen any other students? We have several still missing."

Harry answered, even though Snape was clearly addressing the auror. "Pandora is still back there. Parvati, Lavender, Dean and Seamus got taken out by Death Eaters in the forest. I don't know if they're okay or not."

Cries of dismay filled the air from the milling students.

"Quiet!" snapped Snape. "What about Mr. Malfoy. He was your partner."

Harry sneered straight back at Snape. "Last time I saw him he was hiding in the bushes like a coward."

Snape narrowed his eyes and gave Harry a disgusted look, but said nothing, simply nodding at the auror.

Harry shrugged out of the auror's grasp on his shoulder and started up towards the castle.

They walked in silence for a few minutes before the man spoke. "I've heard you want to be an auror, Potter?"

Harry shrugged. "I suppose," he muttered. "It's really the only thing I've ever considered."

"Well, perhaps a titbit of helpful advice, then. During occasions such as this, when you know people have been injured, perhaps even killed –"

Harry gave him an alarmed look, and the auror held up a hand. "I'm not saying your friends are, Mr. Potter, but on such an occasion, what you say, is that they have been accounted for. You do not frighten the masses by making broad statements like they 'got taken out'. "The way you reacted when I said killed, just then. You left over thirty of your fellow students back there feeling the exact same way, only they do not know what happened as well as you do."

Harry looked shame-facedly at the ground. "I don't know what happened either, really. Do you think they're alright?" He looked up at the auror.

"You tell me, Mr. Potter. Tell me what you saw, and make a deduction."

"What do you mean?"

"For instance, you said that Dean and Seamus were... ahem... taken out. In what way?"

"Oh! Well, Seamus got stupefied...I think. It was red."

"Right! So he is most likely not dead, and will be enervated with little more than bruises. What of Dean?"

"He got hit with some a yellow spell. It went right through his shield spell."

The auror nodded thoughtfully. "Probably something more dangerous than a stunner, but whether it was fatal or not, we have no clue. It went through his shield spell, meaning it has a specific counter, or his shield was not very strong."

Harry shook his head. "He was holding his own against the Death Eater pretty well, I don't think he was a particularly powerful wizard, so it probably needed a specific counter shield. Isn't it usually the nastier curses that need a specific shield?"

"True, and good logic there, I might add. Do not worry yourself, however. In general, yellow curses represent those which are nasty,

but rarely fatal under normal circumstances. Tell me now about the two girls.”

“Parvati and Lavender...” They were walking through the Entrance hall now, and Harry called hear the chatter of students at lunch in the Great hall. “I wasn’t there when they were attacked. We just heard Lavender scream; that’s why we went to help them.”

“Okay, but surely you made observations when you arrived in the clearing?”

“I just saw them knocked out and tied up on the ground. I couldn’t tell if they were alive.”

“No, but you can deduce from what you saw.”

“Deduce what from what?”

“Well, you mentioned that they were at least unconscious, perhaps dead, correct?”

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat, and nodded weakly. “You mentioned secondly that they were tied up...”

“Yes...”

“And so?” The man looked expectantly at Harry, and he frowned, thinking. “They tied them up...” Suddenly his eyes lit up. “They tied them up so they couldn’t get away! They were only stunned, and stunners wear off, so they tied them up!” He looked at the auror, hoping desperately for validation of his conclusion.

He received a nod of approval. “Very good, Mr. Potter. That is the conclusion I had come to also. There is certainly no need to bind someone who is dead. I think, as I have mentioned several times already, that your friends will be fine.”

Harry sighed, relieved, as the auror steered him into the hospital wing by his shoulder. “Thank you sir,” he said to the auror as madam Pomfrey bustled over.

“For what, Mr. Potter?”

Harry shrugged, embarrassed to admit he had been panicking. “You know...just, thanks.” He gave a small smile.

The auror gave his shoulder a squeeze, before stepping back and moving towards the door. “I did nothing but force you to think about what you yourself had seen. Always remember to think before and after you act. It saves everyone, including yourself, a lot of worry.”

With that, the auror left and Harry was herded over to a bed. He pulled off his robe and unbuttoned his shirt for the matron, who was fetching a healing potion, having seen the blood staining his robe. There was a gash in his robe and shirt, which he mended with a quick reparo. A few loose strands of cotton stuck out from the fabric; not as good as Hermione would have done, but he wasn’t really fussed.

He swallowed the potion madam Pomfrey handed him and grimaced as she wiped the blood away from his wound with a wet cloth and applied a cream to the cut. Just as she was finishing, a group of people shuffled in to the infirmary. Harry grinned when he saw Lavender, Parvati and Seamus.

“Harry, mate! You’re alright.”

“Yeah, I’m fine Seamus. Where’s Dean?” he asked, his smiling slipping off his face.

Seamus’ smile dimmed as well. “He’s coming up with the healer. They say he’ll be alright, but he’s still knocked out. I don’t know what’s wrong with him.”

Harry sighed, glad to hear that he was at least going to be okay. Lavender and Parvati were crying quietly as they were ushered in to beds.

Harry was quite exhausted from the day’s activities, and he leaned back on the bed, closing his eyes. He quickly fell asleep.



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Madam Pomfrey allowed Harry to leave the infirmary for dinner, with strict instructions to be careful. His cut was nearly fully healed, and he walked down to the Great Hall with Seamus, Lavender and Parvati who had also been kept for observation.

When they took seats at the table, they were bombarded with questions about the attack, and people wondering if Dean was going to be alright. "He'll be right," explained Seamus. "He got hit with a nasty bone shattering hex of some sort. Should'a seen him. There were all these little bits of bone sticki-"

"Ugh! Seamus, do you really have to go in to that much detail? We're just glad to know he's going to be fine," said Lavender, and the girls sitting around her nodded in agreement.

...

Harry walked back in to the common room after his shower, looking around for his friends. He spotted Ron and Hermione over at a small table in the corner, and wondered briefly where Pandora was. He began to make his way over when he spotted Ginny curled up in an armchair by the fire and looking completely miserable.

He changed his course and went over to her, perching on the arm of her chair and looking down at her with an expression of concern.

"Hey Gin, are you okay?"

She looked up at him and gave him a small smile, brushing away a small tear before it could run down her cheek. "Yeah, just crying over Dean. I can't believe what happened today."

"Don't worry, he's going to be perfectly fine," said Harry bracingly, pulling her into a rough hug.

She sniffed. "I know, it's just so... close to home. You never realise how bad things can get until it hits you like this, until someone you know gets hurt and you actually see them." She looked at him quickly.

"I'm sorry, I guess you already know this, what with Sirius, and your parents..." She trailed off, looking horrified.

"I'm sorry, Harry! I didn't mean to bring them up, I'm just spouting here, and-"

"Gin, it's okay!" he replied hastily, seeing that she was working herself up. "Really, I was upset about Sirius, but it was months ago now. I'll never forget him, and I'm sad that he died, but I'm not going to burst in to tears at the mention of his name."

She smiled weakly, and he added, "At least, not anymore. You should have seen me last holidays. Crying like a little girl." He nudged her and she let out a small giggle, finally smiling properly.

"It just makes you realise that you can't take things for granted, especially not people. Things like friendship and trust, you have to make the most of them, because they won't always be there."

He nodded sagely, thinking that he really did take those things for granted. Well, perhaps not trust, but certainly friendship, especially with Ron and Hermione. It was then that he realised that even though he expected others to keep him in the loop, he hadn't necessarily been doing the same thing. He set his shoulders, finally coming to a decision that he had subconsciously been trying to make for a while.

He looked down at Ginny. "Are you going to be alright now?"

"She stretched and stood up. "Yes, I think I might go up to bed though. All this crying over nothing has made me tired."

Harry watched her go up the staircase to the girls' dormitory before he headed over to Ron and Hermione, noting that Pandora was luckily still absent. He wanted to talk to his two best friends privately.

"Hey guys," he said as he sat down at the low table.

"Hey mate. Want to play chess?" Ron's face lit up with hope, and Harry had to smile.

“Ron,” chided Hermione. “You haven’t finished your Care of Magical Creatures Essay yet.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Hagrid sets essays now?”

“Yes,” muttered Ron sullenly. “I thought it would be easy, but then Hagrid had to go and get standards. His class is actually difficult!”

Hermione smacked him lightly on the arm. “Hagrid is a good teacher, Ron, much better than previous years, and I for one am glad that he has a more rounded curriculum now.”

“You would be,” he muttered in return, before looking back at Harry expectantly. “So, chess?”

Harry shook his head and smiled at Ron’s downcast expression. “Actually, I was hoping I could talk to both of you about something.”

There must have been something in his tone, because Ron and Hermione looked up at him, both with serious expressions on their faces. “What is it, Harry?” asked Hermione quietly. “You know you can tell us anything.”

“Yeah, I know, and it occurred to me when I was talking to Ginny that I haven’t really been telling you anything.”

Hermione nodded, agreeing.

Harry fidgeted uncomfortably.

“You guys remember last year when we went to the Ministry, and we got the prophecy?”

“Of course,” said Hermione, and Ron nodded, leaning forward.

“I can’t believe it got smashed!” he exclaimed indignantly. “All that work and we didn’t even get to hear what it said!”

“Well really, Ron! That wasn’t what all we were there for,” scolded Hermione.

Ron shrugged. "I'm just saying..."

Harry continued. "Well, the thing is, I did hear it."

"What!?" squeaked Hermione. "But you said..."

"I didn't hear it at the Ministry, I heard it afterwards."

"But how?" asked Hermione.

"Dumbledore told me; he's the one who heard it." He smirked. "You'll never believe this Mione, but Trelawney was the one who gave it."

"That old bat? No way!" shouted Ron, chuckling.

"Ron! Be serious," scolded Hermione.

"Sorry, sorry, I'm just remembering the time you walked out of Divination, and all the times you called her an old fraud."

"Well, despite the fact that she did give one good prophecy, I think she is still a bit of a fraud," said Harry.

"Yes, well, that's not important right now," said Hermione, leaning forward eagerly. "What did it say?"

Ron leaned in closer as well. "Was it really about You-Know-Who? Was it about you?"

Harry nodded. "Both of us. It said... the one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord will be born... I can't remember the exact wording. It said neither can live while the other survives, basically, that I have to kill him or he'll kill me."

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione had a hand over her mouth, and her eyes had taken on a glassy look at his last words.

"Man, that's rough," said Ron.

Hermione turned her aghast expression on Ron and whispered angrily, in a high voice, "Rough! Rough, Ronald? That's all you can say!"

"Well what am I supposed to say? Sorry mate, I don't mean to sound... I dunno, insensitive or anything."

Harry gave a small smile. "It's okay. It is rough. I didn't know quite what to say when Dumbledore told me either. Although, I think I was still in shock about Sirius and the fight at the Ministry."

"Wait, what?! He told you that, just after Sirius had died!?" asked Hermione, anger lighting her face.

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, so?"

"You'd just lost your godfather, and he went and lumped that on you?"

"Now that is insensitive," said Ron.

Harry frowned. "I never really thought about it before. I guess it wasn't exactly the most opportune time, was it?"

"No, it most certainly was not!" spat Hermione. "I really cannot believe that man!"

Harry smiled at Hermione's anger on his behalf.

"Are you sure it means you, though? Did it actually say your name?" asked Ron.

"No, but it said born at the end of July, and that the 'Dark Lord would mark him as his equal,' or something to that effect. Oh, and that this person's parent's had thrice defied Voldemort."

"But surely that could refer to more than you!"

Harry leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Well apparently, it could have been Neville."

Ron snorted loudly, but Hermione remained serious. "So how do we know it isn't Neville?"

"Dumbledore says it's me because of the bit that says 'mark as an equal.' The night my parents died, he chose me over Neville when he came to kill me himself. And he gave me the scar."

"Marked..." murmured Hermione.

"How are you supposed to do him in, though? I mean, he's the most powerful Dark Wizard in history, and no offence, but you're just... Harry."

Harry smiled. Ron had no idea how much being 'just Harry' meant to him. He shrugged and ran a hand through his hair. "I really have no idea. It says I have some 'power the Dark lord knows not,' but like you say, I'm just Harry. I really have no special talents, except maybe Parseltongue, and Voldemort definitely knows about that."

"Maybe you just haven't discovered your talent yet. Most wizards and witches don't gain their full powers until they reach adulthood anyway. Have you talked to Dumbledore about this?"

"Yeah." Harry rolled his eyes. "He reckons this power is love." He snorted. "Yeah right."

Ron chortled. "Love? What does he expect you to do, hand him a bunch of roses and watch him keel over dead from shock?"

Harry laughed along with Ron, but Hermione just glared. "This is not funny! I don't know how you two can laugh about it!"

Harry looked at her apologetically. "Oh, come on, Hermione. How can I not laugh? If I didn't try to look at the funny side of things I would be completely depressed. I don't really think it's funny, but I'm not going to wallow in self pity and despair, either."

"Yeah Mione, lighten up a bit," said Ron with a comforting smile.

“Lighten up...”repeated Hermione in a strangled whisper, before her face crumpled and she burst in to tears.

‘Oh no, Hermione, don’t cry!” said Harry, moving to sit on her other side and putting an arm around her as she sobbed into her hands.

“I-it’s j-just s-s-so terrible!” she cried, leaning against Ron who also had an arm around her. “And you’re just I-laughing!”

Some of the surrounding students were casting surreptitious glances in their direction as Hermione continued to cry.

“Ssshhh. Come on, why don’t we all stop crying. Everything’s going to be okay,” said Ron in a quiet voice, and Harry took his arm from around Hermione, moving back to his side of the table.

Ron looked up briefly, and Harry indicated that he was leaving, Ron giving a nod in return. Harry got up quietly and made his way over to the portrait hole.

The corridor outside was quiet and dark, and he set off in a random direction, thinking along the way. After telling Ron and Hermione about the prophecy, he felt as though a weight had been lifted of his shoulders. It was mostly a kind of relief, but partly the lifting of some guilt at having kept it from them.

...

When he returned to the common room an hour later, it was to find Hermione in good spirits again, chatting quietly with Ron and Pandora.

“Hey guys,” he said as he sat down again.

“Harry!” said Hermione, grabbing his hand. “I’m so sorry about before. I just got carried away. Let’s talk later, alright?” She gave him a small smile, which he returned.

“Sure, Mione.”

“What happened before?” asked Pandora curiously, looking between the three of them.

Hermione shrugged lightly. “I just got a little bit upset, but I’m alright now.”

“Oh, alright” replied Pandora, looking slightly suspicious at the answer.

They spent the rest of the evening alternating between chess and homework.

oOo

The next day at lunch, Harry unfolded a copy of the Weekend Prophet that had been left at the table. On the front page was an article entitled ‘Attack on Hogwarts School Raises Fears for Student Safety.’

“Hey, look at this. There’s an article about the attack yesterday.” The people without their own leaned in to get a look at the paper, and he began to read aloud for the benefit of the group.

“A group of Death Eaters managed to infiltrate the perimeter of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry yesterday in a blatant show of You-Know-Who’s reach.

During the morning they attacked from the front boundaries of the school, making their way through the forest and towards the lake.

One student was seriously injured, but is expected to make a full recovery. Thanks to the quick thinking of several students and teachers who managed to fend off the attackers, everyone else escaped unscathed.

One arrest was made, a rookie Death Eater whose name has yet to be released.

The school and Ministry were inundated with owls from concerned and angry parents questioning the integrity of the school’s defences.



The question must be asked – are our children safe? Many, including Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, claim Hogwarts to be among the safest establishments in all of Wizarding Britain, but if those that the school is directly warded against can gain access, the claims of our political and social leaders must be questioned.

A spokesperson for the school has stated that only the outermost wards were affected, and that if the Death Eaters had been intending to harm anyone within the school, they would have been unable to get any closer to the school than the forest.

In addition, he assures the public that stronger wards will be erected, a daunting task requiring the wands of many wizards.”

Harry frowned as he folded the paper. “I don’t understand how they did get past the wards. The Prophet is right – Hogwarts is supposed to be one of Britain’s safest places, but if rookie Death Eaters can get in...”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Honestly! If you would just read *Hogwarts: A History*. The outer wards are to warn off intruders. It probably wasn’t a rookie who broke them, it’s more likely there was a more knowledgeable wizard behind that. The wards get steadily stronger the closer you get to the castle. Although, I did think that the strongest wards extended all the way to the front gates.”

“Well, maybe they will now, what with this attack,” commented Ron.

“Hmm, well I’m off for detention,” he said to Ron and Hermione. They waved good bye and he set off towards the dungeons for Legilimency with Snape.

...

The lesson went relatively smoothly, and was shorter than usual as well, for which Harry was grateful. He managed to successfully cast the spell towards the end of the lesson, but he was completely unable to control any of Snape’s memories. He left, for once free of the usual headache that he had after the trying lessons.

He decided to stop by the Chamber for a while. It was his usual destination after a lesson with Snape, because the peace and quiet helped dull the ached in his head, and even though he didn't have one today, he found himself keen to stick with the routine.

What he was not counting on however, was being accosted by Malfoy halfway there. "Potter! Headed anywhere in particular?" asked the blonde.

Harry looked coldly over at him, still angry about the previous day. "Piss off, Malfoy. I really don't feel like putting up with you right now."

Malfoy looked surprised for a second. "What's got your knickers in a twist now, Potter?"

Harry scowled as he answered. "Any chance you remember yesterday?"

"Oh that," said Malfoy, waving a hand carelessly. "You can't get angry at me for that."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"You know what side I'm on. It shouldn't have surprised you that I didn't want to get involved."

"You just sat there, hiding in the bushes while those Death Eaters attacked our friends."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "They were your friends, Potter, not mine. And just for your information, I wasn't hiding. After you left I headed back up to the castle."

"You mean you ran away like a coward."

"I did not run away. I chose not to put myself in danger. I might also point out that on my way back to the castle, I saw over a dozen of our classmates also heading that way, including a good many of your brave Gryffindor compatriots. They certainly were not rushing

headlong into a fight, yet I don't see you angry at them. They are the cowards, Potter. I am the enemy. There's a substantial difference there."

Harry glared, but couldn't really deny Malfoy's statement, and the Slytherin gave a victorious smirk as they entered Myrtle's bathroom.

"I don't want to talk to you, Malfoy, so stay away from me," he said as they descended the stairs in to the library.

Malfoy shrugged, evidently not caring. "Fine by me." He pulled a book of the shelves, and raced ahead of Harry, settling himself down in Harry's favourite spot, still smirking.

Fuming, Harry chose to ignore him and sat at the other end of the lounge with his own book. Salazar slithered down from her branch and up his arm, settling his head on Harry's shoulder.

"Hello Salazzzar." hissed Harry, smiling affectionately at the snake.

"Greetingsss Harryyy. What isss the matter?"

Harry petted him lightly. "Malfoy isss jussst being hisss usual ssself. I'm angryyy at him."

"Shhhould I beee too?"

Harry chuckled. "No, not unless you want too."

"You are my massster. If you wisshhh me to be, I will."

"No, we're just having an argument. We fight all the time. You guysss can ssstill be friendsss."

Salazar gave a little hiss of happiness and moved back to sun himself on the branch, leaning Harry to his book.

...

Harry read until his rumbling stomach alerted him that it was time for dinner, and he stood up, stretching. "Come on Malfoy, let's go."

The Slytherin checked his watch before snapping his book shut and standing up.

They made their way out of the library, past the basilisk and up the stone steps to Myrtle's bathroom. Before he opened the door, he pulled out the Marauder's Map to make sure there was no one in there. The coast was clear, and he hissed the password, waiting as the stone doorway slowly opened. He checked the Map again and to make sure the corridor was empty before stepping out in to the hallway, Malfoy following him.

He was about to put the Map away when a name caught his eyes. Nymphadora Tonks was travelling through the Great Hall, and Harry smiled. It seemed like ages since he had seen her, and he set off, hoping to intercept her on the way to wherever she was headed.

Unfortunately, by the time he got to the first floor corridor he thought she had been headed towards, she was gone, and he checked the Map again, seeing that she was nearly at Dumbledore's office. Hoping he would catch her on her way back down, he made his way to the Great Hall for dinner, heading to where Ron and Hermione were sitting.

"Hey guys, where's Pandora?"

"She said she'll be here shortly. I think she had to go and see a teacher," answered Hermione."

"Oh. Did you see Tonks come past?"

He was too busy serving himself to notice the look Ron and Hermione exchanged.

"Tonks? Er...no..." said Ron, stammering slightly. Harry looked up, eyebrows raised.

“Well she was here, to see Dumbledore about the attack, or something else for the Order I suppose. Maybe she’s one of the people helping to put up new wards. I saw her on the Map. I keep wanting to say hi, but I always seem to miss her,” he explained as he spooned gravy over his beef.

Hermione turned back to her dinner. “Well, she does have a full time job, so I imagine she’s quite busy. If she’s here, it probably is Ministry or Order business.”

“Yeah, I suppose. I just haven’t seen her since the Ministry last year. I wanted to talk to her about Sirius, seeing as they were related, but it seems way too late now.”

“I’m sure she’s alright Harry. After all, she’s an auror. She sees things like that in her job all the time.”

“Yeah, you’re right, I guess. Still, would be nice to say hi.”

Just then, Pandora appeared, plonking herself down next to Harry and knocking over a jug of pumpkin juice as she reached for a bun.

“Opps, sorry! Wotcher guys!”

oOo

26 reviews for chapter 25, which I think is a record. Applause for the 200th reviewer!!! Draeconin : )

Thanks heaps to all chapter 25 reviewers:

Junky

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Andie

Lexor

kitsune-princess94

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once and then again

SHuntress

draconicflare

Draeconin

La Mariane

## Harry Gets Mad

oOo

"Yeah, I suppose. I just haven't seen her since the Ministry last year. I wanted to talk to her about Sirius, seeing as they were related, but it seems way too late now."

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Just then, Pandora appeared, plonking herself down next to Harry and knocking over a jug of pumpkin juice as she reached for a bun.

"Opps, sorry! Wotcher guys!"

oOo

Harry sucked in a sharp breath, inhaling a mouthful of pumpkin juice and spluttering.

It was as if the words she had spoken flipped a lever in his mind, unleashing a million things he should have seen before. The clumsiness, her permanently cheery temperament, her superior duelling skills, the annoyingly incessant need to constantly be at his side or know where he was going.

He stood abruptly, breathing heavily.

"Harry?" questioned Hermione, her voice confused.

He didn't speak, instead looking shortly at first Hermione, then Ron, and then glaring pointedly at Pandora, his nostrils flaring.

Her eyes widened in realisation, and he heard Hermione speak.  
"Harry, we-"

He snapped his head around, and ground out, "Don't."

Then, he turned and stormed away, his jaw clenched and his fists shaking in anger.

He heard hurried footsteps behind him.

“Harry, wait!”

“Don’t follow me!” he roared, not caring about the bewildered looks he was receiving from the students in the Great Hall as his voice echoed in the huge cavern.

They ignored him, following him into the Entrance Hall where he spun angrily to face them. Ron stood looking immensely guilty just behind Hermione and Pandora was standing back near the doors.

“We can explain-” started Hermione, but he cut her off.

“I don’t need you to explain,” he hissed. “You lied to me!”

“Just liste-”

“NO!” he yelled. “You knew I didn’t like being followed, or having my life controlled, but you didn’t say ANYTHING! You PROMISED me that you wouldn’t lie to me!”

“We didn’t-” began Hermione.

“A lie by omission is still a lie!”

“I was going to say we didn’t have a choice! Dumbledore said it was to keep you safe!”

“I don’t care! I trusted you! I trusted you both with my” he lowered his voice, “my biggest secret, and you still lied to me.”

“But Dumbbl-“



“Screw Dumbledore!” he roared, not caring who heard. Hermione slapped a hand over her mouth as she gave a startled gasp, and Ron merely stood looking extremely uncomfortable.

Harry was absolutely livid, and his anger was growing by the minute as Hermione, and then Pandora- no, Tonks, he reminded himself furiously – tried to defend the deceitful actions of his two best friends.

“Harry, you have to forgive them. The Order did this for your own protection. There was a lot of discussion about telling you, but we finally decided you would be happier not knowing.” she explained quickly.

“Happier not knowing!” he repeated angrily. “How many times do I have to bloody say that I want to know what’s going on?! You bloody ignorant people! I’m sick of my life being controlled.” As he yelled, he marched up to the three of them until he was standing less than a metre from them.

Tonk’s disguised face had paled considerably at his words, and in the brief silence that followed, Harry noticed that the paintings lining the walls of the Entrance Hall were rattling in their places, the occupants of the paintings looking highly alarmed.

“Mate... maybe you should calm down a bit, don’t you think?” said Ron, stepping in front of Hermione and eyeing the walls nervously.

Harry let out a short harsh laugh. “Mate!? I’ll give you mate!” With that, he swung his fist straight into Ron’s face, feeling a surge of satisfaction when Ron’s head snapped back and his best friend fell to the ground, out cold. Hermione gave a squeak of surprise, kneeling down to help Ron.

With the tall redhead out of the way, Harry could see the doorway to the Great Hall where several teachers were hurrying through and student were gawking, open mouthed at the scene unfolding before them.

He turned to the frightened girl huddled on the ground before him and bent so his face was inches from hers. "I'll say this Hermione, you are so lucky I wouldn't hit a girl, or you'd be lying next to Ron right now!"

Having said that, he turned on his heel and stormed up the stairs, ignoring the teachers who were angrily ordering him to return.

The paintings rattled as he passed, falling silent and still as he moved away from them. He couldn't believe he had been so blind to Pandora's true identity all this time. True, she was a trained auror and a master of disguise, but he should have seen it. It was so obvious, now that he knew.

Making a sharp turn, he felt for the Pendant under his shirt and apparated, not to the Chamber, but to the Room of Requirement.

He wanted to destroy things, and knew he would regret it if he took his anger out on the Chamber. He paced impatiently back and forth in front of the bare expanse of wall, and on the third pass a door appeared. He threw it open and stormed in, slamming it behind him.

Once he was inside, he grabbed his hair in both hands, yelling out a string of swear words and then punching the wall.

Sharp pain erupted in his hand, fuelling his anger. He turned to the room that, had he taken the time to look, was really quite beautiful. A thousand fragile ornaments were scattered about the room on shelves, low tables, or just standing on their own. Glass vases and decorations split the light, creating bursts and twinkles of colour, stone statues cast dim shadows, and antique pieces of furniture sat sturdily in all their hand-crafted elegance.

Harry however, took no time to notice this as he slashed his wand through the air and obliterating a stone statue of an armless woman with a blue smashing hex. The action bought no relief to his anger however, and he flung his wand aside.

Harry picked up a glass vase, hurling it at the wall. It hit with a resounding smash, a thousand pieces of glass tinkling to the ground. It was better, but still not good enough.

A solid metal soft ball bat appeared leaning against the wall, and he picked it up, feeling its weight with satisfaction. It was the perfect weapon to use against the delicate ornaments, and he swung at the nearest china vase hearing the pleasing crash as it shattered under the blow.

Before the last shard had fallen to the floor, the bat was turned on a small table, which was soon cracked in half by a downwards swish of the bat. The wood didn't break in quite such a satisfying way as the glass and china, so he swung the bat at mirror sitting in the corner, catching a glimpse of his angry visage in mirror the split second before it shattered.

A sandstone statue cracked along a fault line when he brought the bat down on it, breaking into chunks when the two halves fell to the floor.

For hours, he made his way through the room, systematically smashing every single breakable item, relishing in the gratifying sounds of his destruction and the burn in his muscles. Finally, physically and emotionally drained, he collapsed sweating to the floor amidst the debris, lying flat on his back with arms and legs splayed out. He no longer felt angry, just completely hollow. If only he could feel nothing, if there was some spell that could make him immune to emotions. But then, he reminded himself, he'd be even more like Voldemort. After all, didn't Dumbledore say that Voldemort was incapable of loving?

Deciding he didn't want to think about it, he closed his eyes tiredly and tried to clear his mind. After all, wasn't Occlumency the perfect tool for controlling his emotions? Snape always said he needed to do that more, always said Occlumency would help him learn how. Snape, who never lied to him. Snape, who hated him, but helped him anyway.

He gradually realised that he was shivering. It was cold on the hard stone floor, and the sweat on his skin chilled him. His robes were drenched and he was beginning to feel uncomfortable, so he pushed himself to his feet and grasped the Pendant again. This time he apparated to the library in the Chamber and made his way through to

the opulent bathroom. He had slept in the bedroom a few times, but he had never used the bathroom before. Now however, he was immensely glad that it was there.

He waited wearily as the deep bath filled before stepping out of his clothes. Splinters of glass tinkled as they hit the floor, and clay dust from one of the vases he had destroyed puffed up when he dropped his robe.

His arms and legs were covered in tiny slivers of glass and small cuts that stung when the water hit them, but he ignored the dull pain and floated in the bath until his skin started to wrinkle. He decided to get out when he started to fall asleep in the water and made his way to the bedroom. The huge bed was extremely inviting, and he was asleep within minutes of crawling under the heavy blankets.

oOo

Harry woke late on Sunday morning – midday sun was streaming through the huge bay window in the library – and his stomach was loudly demanding food. Thankfully this was one of his problems that could be dealt with easily. He apparated to the kitchens and then back to the library within minutes, bringing back an assortment of sandwiches and trying not to think about all of his less easily solved problems.

To begin with, he had punched out his best friend –ex-best friend, he thought savagely, as he ripped in to a ham and cheese sandwich – who had been lying to him for Merlin-knew-how-long, he had loudly insulted a good many people, including the headmaster, in hearing range of practically the entire school, missed a Legilimency lesson with Snape, which was bound to result in detention, he was the only person in the world who could defeat history's most evil wizard, and he was currently in a self imposed exile a hundred feet below the rest of the school where no one could find him. Not that he minded that last point, but he knew he would eventually have to face the music, and he was not looking forward to that in the least.

He banged his head against the headrest of the lounge, as if hoping it would make him forget everything, but to no avail. He settled instead

for clearing his mind, and found that it made him feel much calmer, less frazzled.

Once he had finished the entire platter of sandwiches, he decided to make use of his time and learn something useful so he pulled out his copy of *The Dark Arts: An Historic Account*, which he usually kept stuck between the cushion and side of the lounge.

Most of the time, he would just browse through the book trying to find curses he knew the Death Eaters used, but today he decided to read the introduction on the classification of spells. He found the topic quite interesting; there were no classes at Hogwarts which dealt with Magical Theory, at least as far as he knew.

Spell types are ordered in threes; jinxes, hexes, and curses. In regards to the Dark Arts, the jinx is the most harmless of spells. Basically, jinxes produce effects which are generally only mildly annoying, and easy to break, such as *Tarantallegra*, which makes one dance uncontrollably.

As Jinxing involves simple spells which are never fatal and rarely even particularly harmful, there are few jinxes that are considered Dark Arts. Of note is the *Murgh Jinx*, which allows the caster to feed off the emotions of others, much as a Dementor does. It is rarely used however, as the emotions of wizards are erratic, and the spell does not discern between positive and negative emotions. Furthermore, the spell requires much attention and energy, so is not suitable for use over any amount of time.

Hexes are harder to cast and dispel than Jinxes, and have effects that range from those similar to jinxes to quite harmful. Though there are many hexes that will kill, death is not the overriding intention of this class of spells. For example, the bone-crushing hex is not in itself fatal, but if a victim is not immediately tended to by a healer, they have little chance of survival, not being able to move without shards of bone ripping through the organs. Many hexes involve afflicting the body with odd combinations, such as the *Bat Bogey Hex* or *Slug Charm*.

There are a great many hexes which are considered Dark Arts, including the full range of Gabbon Hexes, which were specifically designed by the dark wizard Lester Gabbon to inflict serious injury, but not death, and are typically used for torture.

Curses are the strongest of spells, the hardest to cast and deflect. Curses can affect a victim immediately, or lie dormant, waiting for an event to occur. For example, many objects can be cursed, activating only when a certain type of person (muggle or child or magical creature for example) touches the object. Similarly, a curse can lie dormant in a person's body, or remain in effect for many centuries after it has been cast.

The colour of spells, Dark Arts or not, covers the range of the visible spectrum, and includes some which exist in the invisible spectrum. Though there are many exceptions the colour of a spell generally denotes a specific subtype of spell.

In regards to curses and hexes;

Green spells are generally fatal curses, at the least being detrimental to the health or physical integrity of a wizard. By far the most notorious is Avada Kedavra, the Killing Curse. Many curses causing sickness lie in the range of Green coloured curses.

Red spells usually represent retardants, such as stupefy. Some burning curses have a red colour. Apart from these, there are few red curses which are considered Dark Arts.

Blue curses are those affecting the mind and nervous system of a victim. A notable spells of dark magic is the Imperius curse.

Yellow and orange spells are those which have an internal effect on the body. For example, blood boiling curses or bone crushing hexes. There are many Dark Arts spells which take on these colours.

Purple spells are generally associated with those having an external physical effect, such as cutting and slicing hexes, acid curses and burning curses often appear as purple. There are also many purple

spells considered dark arts, most of which will not necessarily kill but are extremely disfiguring or painful.

As an aside, spells not designed specifically for the Dark Arts or Defence, for example, object spells, healing spells, spells involved in Dark Arts such as necromancy, are of many and widely varying colours.

Harry hummed thoughtfully, before turning to the next page. He spent most of the day perusing the book, breaking now and then to practice shields to spells that he recognised. Around dinner time, he made a trip to the kitchens again, before apparating to the waterfall painting. It had been a while since he had dropped in on a meeting, and he had seen on the Map that there were Order members congregating in Dumbledore's office.

He donned his invisibility cloak before he stepped in to Phineas Nigellus' portrait, as the dour looking man was usually leaning in the edge of his frame, looking down at the occupants of the room.

He quietly slipped past and in to his usual painting, and set the basket of dinner on the grass beside him.

Harry pulled out a plate of chicken and sat back to watch the meeting. So far only Snape, Dumbledore, Tonks and Owens were gathered, and he was surprised when Ron and Hermione were led into the office by Professor McGonagall. He frowned. There was no way they were in the Order, and he realised that it wasn't an Order meeting at all.

Ron was looking at the paintings on the wall, trying to avoid eye contact with the teachers, and Hermione was looking downcast as Dumbledore addressed them.

"Ron, Hermione, we were wondering if you had seen Harry yet?"

"No, sir," replied Hermione miserably and shaking her head. "You haven't found him yet?"

“Unfortunately not, though we cannot begin to imagine where he might be.”

“You don’t think he would leave the castle, do you sir?” she asked.

“I must confess that I really have no idea. We have searched a good deal of the places we thought he might go, but it is a large castle and there are many secret rooms which even I do not know of.”

“Perhaps Mr. Weasley could shed some light on Potter’s disappearance. I was under the impression that the two of them were thick as thieves.” He turned his sour look on Ron. “Surely Mr. Potter made you privy to wherever it is he runs off to all the time. You may have felt no need to tell us before, but if you know, it would be advisable that you tell us now.”

“I don’t know,” muttered Ron glumly. “He always just said he went somewhere quiet where he could be alone.”

“And you have absolutely no idea where that might be?” asked Snape, his tone dubious.

“No.”

“How did he even find out?” asked Professor McGonagall, turning to Tonks, who had assumed her ‘normal’ appearance. “I thought your disguise quite thorough.”

Tonks shrugged half-heartedly. “I really have no idea. I sat down at the table, and he just all of a sudden got angry.”

“It was the Map,” said Hermione, and Harry nearly yelled in frustration and annoyance. “He saw Tonks on it, and then when she sat down at the table, I suppose he just finally put it together.”

There was silence for a moment, before Dumbledore slowly said, “Really?” The surprise was evident in his tone. “You are sure?”

“Er... yes, sir. He said ‘I saw her on the Map.’”



“Interesting...” mused Dumbledore, stroking his beard and staring off in to space.

Except for McGonagall and Snape, who was looking smugly satisfied, the occupants of the room were exchanging puzzled looks.

After a moment, Dumbledore's glazed eyes snapped to Snape, and there was a small twinkle in his eye and a smile tugging at his lips.

Snape raised an eyebrow. “I’m really not the type to say ‘I told you so,’ Headmaster.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “True, true.”

“Huh? What’s going on?” asked Ron.

Snape looked down his nose at Ron. “I don’t believe that is an issue that concerns you, Mr. Weasley.”

“But - ”

“I said it is none of your business. Headmaster, I think we are done with Weasley and Miss Granger.”

“Yes, yes, I suppose, if there is nothing that either of you have to say?” Dumbledore inquired politely.

Both Hermione and Ron shook their heads and left the office, silence descending until the door slid shut behind them and Snape spoke. “That annoying little elf you have employed in the kitchens, who is always hanging on Potter’s every word. Perhaps he knows something? After all, Potter is a growing boy. I doubt a mere teenage temper tantrum would keep him from his food for too long.”

Harry scowled, both at the term ‘temper tantrum,’ and Snape’s annoyingly accurate suggestion. He had never even thought to tell Dobby not to tell anyone he had been there. Perhaps the little elf would be smart enough not to say anything. After all, Dobby was not owned by anyone in the room, he was a free elf, so he was not bound to obey anyone.

"That is an excellent idea, Severus." Dumbledore paused, and then called, "Dobby!"

A loud crack sounded in the circular room and Dobby appeared in front of Dumbledore's desk, adorned in a number of scarves, tea cosies, and wearing several pairs of socks. "Professor Dumbledore called Dobby? What can Dobby be doing for sir?"

"It seems, Dobby, that we have a little problem. If you would be so kind-"

"Oh, for the love of Merlin, Albus! Where is the Potter boy, elf?"

Harry was as shocked as the other occupants of the room looked at Snape's words. Dumbledore, however, appeared quite unaffected, merely moving his gaze to Snape and then back to Dobby in expectation of an answer.

Dobby stood gazing fearfully up at the irate potions master, wringing his hands shuffling his feet. "Dobby isn't knowing where Harry Potter is!" he cried, seeming on the verge of tears. "Harry Potter came to the kitchens for dinner, like he does often, and then he went away again. Dobby doesn't know where!"

"You say he was in the kitchens this evening?" asked McGonagall, for clarification. "Yes, Miss, he is having chicken, with po-"

"And you have no idea where he went when he left?" snapped Snape.

Dobby shook his batty head, his big ears flapping. "Dobby is sorry he isn't knowing more!"

"That's quite alright, Dobby. You may return to the kitchens now. If Harry does happen to come and see you again, I'd like you to let me know at once, as we are looking for him."

Dobby's eyes grew large. "Harry Potter is missing!?"

"I'm sure he's fine Dobby, we are simply unable to locate him, so if you just let me know next time you see him..."

"Yes sir, Professor Dumbledore! Dobby is happy to help! Dobby will do anything to help Harry Potter. Harry Potter is a great wizard!"

With that, Dobby left with a loud crack, leaving behind a group of bemused teachers and a disgusted Snape. Harry himself was feeling somewhat embarrassed, but as no one could see him, it wasn't too bad.

"Well, that didn't get us far," muttered Tonks.

"Well, we shall just have to hope that Harry returns to his dormitory tonight, and his classes tomorrow. In the mean time, we must think of some way to put a stop to this behaviour," replied Dumbledore.

Harry scowled at the statement as the meeting disbanded.

Feeling resentful, he waited until the office was empty and childishly hurled his almost finished dinner at the door of Dumbledore's office, where it shattered, leaving flecks of potato, gravy and chicken bones scattered on the floor and door.

Deciding he felt like talking to someone, he recalled the portrait that occupied the wall in Malfoy's room. Then, he pulled on his cloak and stepped through the barrier, concentrating on that painting.

Unlike last time, the painting was now occupied by a tallish and arrogant looking man who looked suspiciously at where Harry had appeared.

When the man settled back to reading his book, Harry moved over so he had a better view out of the canvas.

Malfoy was sitting at his desk, humming as he leaned back on the back legs of his chair spinning his wand around. Harry smothered a laugh at the un-Malfoyish behaviour. He was about to speak when he overbalanced and fell against the canvas.

He tumbled out of the painting, falling hard on his hands and knees behind Malfoy.

“What the hell?!” yelled the Slytherin, jumping in a very un-aristocratic manner and toppling over backwards on to the floor. “Shite!”

Harry scrambled guiltily to his feet as Malfoy jumped up.

“Potter! What the hell?”

“Er... sorry...”

“What are you bloody doing here? I thought I told you not to spy on me!”

“I wasn’t spying on you, I was bored, so I decided to drop by.”

Malfoy sneered. “Well, good job there.”

Harry smiled. “Good thing I brought my invisibility cloak,” he commented, bending down to pick it up off the floor.

“I take it you’ve been hiding down in the Chamber?” said Malfoy, standing his chair up and leaning against the desk, his arms folded across his chest.

“That’s where I’ve been. Not hiding, though,” replied Harry, looking around the room. He walked over to the window. “Wow!” he said, impressed. “Great view! Tell me again why you get such a good room?”

“Because I’m a prefect. Oh, and father is on the Board of governors for the school.” A sour look crossed his face for a moment. “At least, he was, before the whole Azkaban debacle. I’m sure he’ll be reinstated soon enough.”

Harry ignored the comment, not really having anything to say in response that wasn’t antagonistic. “You can see the edge of the Quidditch Pitch from here! I should tell Ron and Hermione to get their

own roo-" He broke off, remembering that he was extremely angry with the two of them right now.

Suddenly a knock sounded at the door, and Harry whipped around. Malfoy motioned to the corner, and Harry threw the invisibility cloak over his head, moving to where Malfoy had indicated. After checking to make sure no part of Harry could be seen, Malfoy opened the door to reveal Pansy Parkinson, wrapped in a sickly pale purple sleeping gown.

Malfoy leaned against the door frame, his other arm still on the handle, so that Pansy could not get past him into the room.

"Drakey," simpered Pansy, and Harry saw the corner of Malfoy's mouth twitch in an almost imperceptible sneer. "Are you doing anything? I thought we could talk."

"I'm really rather busy right now, Pansy. Perhaps you could come back later?" The tone of Malfoy's voice suggested that he would mind it later was a good few years down the track.

"But Drakey, we never talk anymore!" she whined, her voice getting high. Harry grimaced, supremely glad that the girls in Gryffindor were nothing like Pansy.

"We talked at dinner, Pansy," explained Malfoy patiently. "It's hasn't even been two hours since then. What could possibly have happened in that amount of time that I need to hear about?"

"Not that kind of talk! I mean talk. About... you know, you and me. We never have time for us now."

A slight blush crept across Malfoy's face, and Harry smirked when he saw the Slytherin's eyes dart quickly over to his corner.

"This is not the time, Pansy, and I already told you, there is no us. We're friends, that is all." Malfoy's voice had gained an edge, but he kept his face impassive.

Pansy slapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Aww Drakey, you don't mean that."

"Yes, Pansy, I do. So if you'd just go now, I really do have work to be catching up on."

Pansy gave an exaggerated sigh. "You're always working, Draco, you need to have some fun! Come down to the common room, we're having a little party down there."

"Whatever. I might come down later."

Pansy huffed, eyeing the room under Malfoy's raised arm, but Malfoy didn't move. "Goodbye Pansy. I'm going to close the door now."

Pansy pursed her lips. "Fine. Finish whatever assignment you're working on and then come down."

Malfoy gave a cool smile and shut the door in her face.

"Interesting..." commented Harry, smirking at Malfoy's obvious discomfort.

"Shut up, Potter." Malfoy walked over to his desk and started shuffling papers and quills around.

"I always thought you and Pansy had a thing going. What happened?"

"None of your business, Potter."

Harry shrugged. "Whatever, I just always thought she seems a bit, I dunno... flaky. I don't think I could stand her."

Malfoy snorted, not disagreeing.

"So are you going to go down to the party?"

"Probably not. Pansy will just drink too much and drape herself all over me. I choose not to subject myself to that."

"Well good, we can go to the Chamber instead. I haven't practiced my animagus transformation in a week."

"Alright," replied Malfoy decisively. "Keep your cloak on and follow me down. If you don't get out the portrait hole when I open it, you'll be stuck in the common room, though."

"Yeah yeah, let's go."

Harry opened the door, waiting at the top of the stairs for Malfoy who followed shortly after, closing the door behind him and locking it with a key before setting off down the stairs. As they moved down, Harry noticed other doors. "How many people get their own rooms?"

"Oh, about twelve people. Mostly the prefects, but there are some people who paid for the convenience."

"You walk up all these stairs every day!?" he complained quietly.

"It's worth it not to share a room with Crabbe and Goyle, believe me."

"I thought they were your friends?"

"They are, but their hygiene standards are somewhat lacking."

"Still, this is a lot of stairs."

"Don't worry, we're nearly at the bottom. After all, this tower isn't that high. It juts out a bit from the side of the castle, and it starts in the dungeons remember. It isn't even as tall as the main part of the castle. I doubt it reaches past the second floor. Quiet now."

Harry obeyed, and a few turns of the stairwell later they came out in to the Slytherin common rooms through a door at the top of the stairs that led to all the other dormitories. They went down those stairs, and made their way through the room, which had quite a number of people milling about, some dancing to music that was coming from a wireless radio.

“Drakey!” called Pansy somewhere from their left, but Malfoy ignored her and kept heading for the portrait hole, snatching a bottle of firewhisky off a table on the way.

Harry kept up as best he could, ducking around people and trying not to bump into anyone. Malfoy opened the portrait hole, letting it swing shut slowly and leaving plenty of time for Harry to slip out behind him.

“Was that party still going from yesterday?” asked Harry. Slytherin had absolutely trounced Hufflepuff in Saturday’s Quidditch match.

“Mmhh.”

“You should be in there! You’re the one who won the game!”

“I was there yesterday.”

Harry sighed loudly. “What is the matter, Malfoy?”

“Nothing.”

“Something is obviously wrong.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You’re being short.”

Malfoy shrugged. “Maybe I just don’t feel like talking.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Fine.”

“I take it you’ve forgiven me for my cowardly actions?” asked Malfoy, his voice laced with sarcasm.

Harry looked sideways at Malfoy and saw that he looked slightly angry. “To be honest, I had completely forgotten about it until you brought it up.”

Malfoy didn’t reply, and he sighed. “Look, I admit I might have overreacted a bit.”



Malfoy raised an eyebrow and Harry rolled his eyes. "Alright, more than a bit. I was just angry, okay? I'm sorry."

They continued walking in silence until they reached Myrtle's bathroom and Harry had opened the entrance.

"Apology accepted, I suppose," said Malfoy.

They descended the damp stairs, lighting their wands so they could see the way.

"So what happened to make you blow up like that yesterday?" asked Malfoy, his voice curious. "I must say, it was quite an impressive show."

Harry shrugged. "I don't really want to talk about it."

"Come on, everyone's talking about it. It must have been something pretty major. You went completely off your nut."

Harry sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Basically I'm just sick of everyone treating me like I'm five years old and lying to me. Ron and Hermione promised me they wouldn't, and they lied."

Malfoy looked sceptical. "That's all? They lied to you? I lie to you five times a week, surely you realise that."

"Yeah, well I expect it from a Slytherin, not from people who call themselves my best friends."

"So what did they lie about that was so important?"

By now they had arrived in the chamber, and taken seats at opposite ends of the lounge.

"You know how Dumbledore was having me followed? Well Ron and Hermione knew some stuff about that, and they didn't tell me, even after they promised me they would. I'm just so sick of people controlling my life."

“Hm, bad luck for you. Can’t say I envy you.”

“Yeah well, I don’t want to talk about any of that, so just drop it.”

“Alright, don’t get snarky.” Draco pulled at the cork on the Firewhisky bottle he had taken from the common room.

“Don’t open that now. Let’s practice our animagus forms.”

“No, come on! It’s been a looong day. I deserve this,” replied Malfoy, tugging harder at the cork.

Harry pulled it off of him. “We’ll open it soon. Practice first, though.”

Malfoy groaned, but rolled off of the lounge and went over to one of the armchairs. “Alright, for a little while then.”

They settled down and Harry cleared his mind, feeling his transformations come on after about a minute. He was no closer to guessing what his form was yet, and hoped he would have some defining features soon.

...

They ended up practicing for several hours, but though Harry felt some tingles over his back, neither he nor Malfoy managed any new transformations.

By the time they finished, it was past midnight and far too late to open the Firewhisky bottle. Harry bid goodbye to Malfoy in the library, as he was staying there to sleep.

“Come back here tomorrow, okay? I’ll meet you after dinner.”

“Alright, and then we are opening that Firewhisky!”

Harry grinned in agreement and Malfoy left, heading for the tunnels that led up to the Slytherin common room.

oOo

Ta da!

I know I dragged out the whole Pandora/Tonks thing a bit, but I just couldn't have Harry find out any sooner. The chapter title wasn't very creative, but my creativity seems to run out when it comes to the title. Oh well. Anyway, hope the 'Harry gets angry' scene was up to expectation. Merry Christmas! to those who celebrate it. o : )

I'll post the next chapter after Christmas.

Thanks heaps to my chapter 26 reviewers, love yas!

Befread, Vanessa riddle, AnnF, fufu.a.k., nxkris, phoenixi77, DarkWill0w, Kaeim, ams71080, Jensindenial3516, Roxoan, SHuntress, marshall88, Alexsandra, TheQuiveringQuill, draconicflare, JonathLee, fhippogriff, Cocoa Girl, WolfbainKohaku, nintschibintschi, TigerZodiacAnimaGuru and HazelWolf11 for chapter 6

Ch-ch-ch-changes

Harry woke late on Monday morning; his watch told him it was nearly eleven o'clock, but he wasn't worried about missing classes.

He felt dull in a way, and found it hard to care that he would be in trouble for not attending. Let them worry, he thought. It's their own fault that I don't want to see them. Ron and Hermione, Tonks, and Dumbledore especially. At the moment, he felt he could quite happily never see any of them again.

What he did want to see right now was a big plate of bacon and eggs. He contemplated that for a moment before slipping out of bed and grabbing his invisibility cloak. He then apparated to the corridor where the kitchens were situated. He was disappointed that he couldn't trust Dobby, but he figured that even if the elf popped away to tell Dumbledore straight way, it would still take the old wizard at least ten or eleven minutes to walk down from his office, plenty of time for Harry to get what he wanted for breakfast.

That decided, he tickled the pear in the painting. It wriggled, giggling, and turned into a golden handle. Pulling open the door, he stepped into the kitchen and was immediately mobbed by elves.

"Harry Potter sir!"

"Hi Dobby," replied Harry.

"Harry Potter must wait here, and Dobby will be back!"

Harry hid a smirk. A bit obvious, Dobby. "Just wait a minute, Dobby. There's something I want to ask you."

Dobby looked undecided, but then grinned broadly and waited while Harry asked the house elves to make him some food.

"So Dobby, how are you?" asked Harry, sliding on to a stool next to the elf.

“Dobby is excellent, Harry Potter sir. He is being paid well by Professor Dumbledore, and is enjoying his work very much!”

Harry chatted with Dobby while house elves scurried about around them, glad when his breakfast arrived shortly. “Well, I’d better go, Dobby. Maybe I’ll come and see you again.”

Without waiting for an answer, he pulled his cloak on, grabbed his tray of food and returned to the Chamber. He sat out on the courtyard that overlooked the canyon while he ate. It was a calm day, and a gentle breeze ruffled the leaves of the tree that shaded the stone bench where he sat.

He couldn’t resist the excellent weather, and after he had finished his bacon and eggs, he pulled out the pendant and apparated to his dorm room, under cover of the cloak. It was empty, and he threw open the lid of his trunk. He changed quickly into some fresh clothes and grabbed his broom.

Back at the courtyard, he jumped on his broom. He spent the next few hours flying in the canyon, relishing in the freedom the Chamber and the Pendant gave him.

...

That evening, he kept his eye on the map, waiting for Malfoy to make his way up to Myrtle’s bathroom. After a half hour in the Great Hall, the tiny dot that represented Malfoy began to move through the castle. When he reached Myrtle’s bathroom, Harry apparated to the pipe and opened the entrance for

“You weren’t in any classes today,” stated Malfoy as soon as he saw Harry.

Harry shrugged. “I woke up late.”

“Somehow I don’t think that reason will fly too well with the teachers.”

“Yeah well, I really don’t care at the moment, to tell you the truth.”

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. "I take it your staying down here is some kind of rebellious statement?"

"No! I just didn't feel like going to classes, okay?"

"Are you coming tomorrow? You can't sulk down here forever."

Harry glared. "I'm not sulking, Malfoy!" he replied angrily. "And I don't know if I'm coming tomorrow. I'll see how I feel then."

"If you say so," drawled Malfoy, losing interest in the subject. "Are we going to practice our animagus transformations tonight? It's been awhile since either of us had a new one."

"Mm, good idea. I can't wait to find out what kind of animal I am."

"Personally, I'm banking on some defenceless little thing like a snail, or a kitten."

Harry rolled his eyes at the lame attempt to insult him. "Don't be ridiculous! Snails don't have big sharp teeth like I do, and neither do kittens, for that matter."

"Well, we'll see."

They settled down, and Harry quickly cleared his mind, recalling how the last time he'd practiced he had felt tingles down his back. After a few moments, he felt the old changes take place; bigger, sharper teeth, longer tongue, the spike in his longer feet and the useless tiny arms.

...

An hour later, after several imagined tingles, he finally felt a real one. The odd feeling started in his jaw and then raced along his scalp and continued down his neck, then spread through his chest and down the length of his torso. He shivered as he felt the changes coming over him, excitement coursing through him when he realised more than one change was taking place.

When the odd sensations in his body subsided, he opened his eyes to inspect the transformations. The first thing he saw was Malfoy, standing a few feet away and looking at Harry with a curious and excited expression.

"Looks like you had a bit more luck than me this week," said the Slytherin, and Harry peered closer at him, trying to see what, if anything, had changed about him.

"My ears are gone," said Malfoy, realising what Harry was looking for. He held up his hands and wiggled them. "And I have claws." He did indeed. His hands were much larger, and his nails had turned a blackish colour, much like the nails on Harry's feet. The nails were thicker and pointed, and his hands had taken on a rough orange look.

"Cool," said Harry. At least, that's what he tried to say. What came out was barely intelligible. His mouth felt very strange, and he couldn't form the word properly.

Malfoy laughed. "Thanks, I think. Look at yourself, though. Go over to the mirror."

Harry stood up, and noticed immediately that Malfoy no longer towered over him. The other boy was still bigger, but only by about half a head. Looking down, he saw that the changes in his feet were more pronounced. What had before appeared to be rough black nails were now distinctly claw like, and his feet were even bigger, the spaces between his toes more spread.

Harry walked over to the mirror and looked at himself, drawing in a startled breath when he saw his reflection. His jaw had extended to accommodate a greater number of long, sharp teeth, and his jet black tongue was longer and thinner. It made sense that he couldn't form words properly; he no longer had a human mouth. With the extension of his jaw, his head was now very cone shaped, and his features appeared flattened and stretched downwards.

His messy black hair was gone, leaving bare skin and two bumpy black ridges, one on either side of his head, leading down the back of his neck.

The final change had occurred in the length of his body. His torso was comically long, and he found it was quite flexible, allowing him to twist further than he would normally be able to.

His tiny arms looked ridiculous, and were completely useless. He spent a few minutes admiring himself before closing his eyes and returning to his normal form.

He turned to Malfoy, who was still transformed. "So, any ideas? I still can't think of an animal that has all the characteristics I seem to be developing."

"Hm... I don't know either. If I had to guess, I'd probably say your idea of a dinosaur is the closest thing... although, your arms look far too small. Perhaps as the rest of your body gets bigger, so will they?"

"Yeah, I dunno. I'm definitely weird looking at the moment."

Malfoy laughed. "Actually, your body reminded me a bit of a flobberworm, to tell the truth. You looked like something Hagrid might drag out of the forest. I can see it now, he's got you thrown over his shoulder, and you're screaming at him to drop you, but he can't understand you, and you're waving your tiny arms about, trying to get his attention!"

Harry had to laugh at the image. "Shut up!" he yelled jovially at Malfoy, who was also laughing.

After a minute, they both stopped and Harry asked, "So is it just your ears and hands that changed, then?"

"Yeah." Malfoy inhaled deeply and looked around the room. "I can smell really well, and everything looks different. I can still see, but better than usual. All these little details just jump out at me."

"Well, dragons do have heightened senses like that, for hunting and that sort of thing."



“Hm. It would be great for Quidditch, trying to catch the snitch. Shame everyone would see the other changes. Besides, I don’t think I’d be able to hold onto my broom too well with these.” He held up his hands, flexing the long claw-like hands.

“That would be cheating, anyway.”

“Not really. I’d just be using a natural talent.”

“True, but you’d have an unfair advantage over everyone else.”

“You mean like having a faster broom than other players? Because then you’d be one with an unfair advantage.”

Malfoy smirked triumphantly.

“Having any kind of broom you want is in the rules, Malfoy. Somehow I don’t think having dragon eyes is.”

“Well, if you find where it says you can’t, let me know!” With that, Malfoy flounced away and Harry shook his head in despair, rolling his eyes.

“Time for Firewhisky!” declared Malfoy, holding up the bottle. “I’ve been hanging out for this all day!” He pulled the cork, and poured out two mugs, handing one to Harry.

Very shortly, Harry was feeling pleasantly dazed. The drink warmed him and instilled an enjoyable haze in his mind. Malfoy was humming merrily as Salz curled up on his chest.

“So Malfoy,” called Harry, “did you make up with Pansy yet?” He smiled stupidly and laughed when Malfoy scowled, slopping his drink in Harry’s direction.

“I do not like Pansy! She a conceited cow!”

“Conceited! That’s a bit hypocritical coming from you, don’t you think!” Malfoy didn’t reply, and Harry continued.

“Drakey, Drakey!” he crowed, in an extremely bad impersonation of Pansy’s high, whiny voice. “Come down to the party Drakey!” He burst out laughing at his poor impression. “Oof!”

Malfoy had thrown a pillow at his head. “Don’t call me Drakey, I hate that! My name is Draco,” he said, raising his nose imperiously.

“How come you don’t like her anymore? You two looked pretty cosy earlier this year.”

Malfoy scowled as if reliving a bad memory. “I realised she’s just an immature, spoilt brat.” Suddenly he smiled. “Besides, I like someone else.”

Harry sat up and leaned forward eagerly, spilling some of his drink on his shirt. “Tell me who!”

“No,” replied Malfoy simply, not opening his eyes.

“Aw, come on! Why not?”

“Because.”

“I won’t tell anyone!”

...

“If I guess right, will you tell me?”

“Maybe.”

Harry sat back. “Hmm... well I assume she is, in fact, a she?”

Malfoy choked on his drink and his eyes flew open. “Of course she’s a she, Potter! I’m not gay!” he spluttered indignantly.

Harry burst into laughter. “Okay, okay. Um... she’s in Slytherin?”

“Yeeees.”

“Erm... on the Quidditch team?”

“Are you blind, Potter? The Slytherin Quidditch team has no girls on it. Unless you think Goyle is attractive...? I know his hair is getting a bit long, but-”

“Ugh! No more!” cried Harry, clapping his hands over his ears. “Next question, next question!”

“Nope. That’s enough for now. I don’t want to make it too easy for you.”

“Oh, come on! All I know is that she’s in Slytherin!”

Malfoy shrugged. “Should have asked better questions then, instead of things that should have been obvious.”

“Alright, but next time I see you, I’m going to have more questions.”

oOo

The next morning when Harry woke, he was feeling terrible. His head was pounding, his mouth was dry and he felt like throwing up. He dragged himself off the lounge and in to the bathroom, where he promptly threw up in the toilet.

Fifteen minutes later, he dragged himself back to the lounge, noting that Malfoy was gone. The sun was shining brightly, and he pointed his wand at the curtains, closing them across the huge window and sighing in relief when the room became dark.

He felt Salz cool body slither up his arm.

“Looksss like another day of no classesss,” he hissed.

“The sssun isss already half way across the ssskyyyy.”

“Huh?” Harry looked at his watch and saw that it was nearly three o’clock. “Shite!” he groaned. “What time did I go to sleep last night!?”

There was a foul taste in his mouth, and his stomach rumbled. "Want to go to the kitchensss, Salzzz?"

"Yessss."

"Alrighty, then." Harry looked around for his invisibility cloak, and slipped the soft fabric over his body. When he apparated to the kitchens, it was full of busy house elves rushing around, cooking and cleaning. None of them saw him beneath his cloak, and he easily grabbed a few sandwiches and an apple, which he stuffed into his pockets. He grabbed a pitcher of pumpkin juice and apparated back to the dark, quiet chamber.

...

The food made him feel a lot better, but he still felt pretty bad, and ended up falling asleep again on the lounge. When he woke up, it was almost completely dark in the chamber. A sliver of silver light was shining through a gap in the curtains, telling him it was night time.

"Lightssss," he hissed, and the torches on the walls burst into light.

He checked his watch and saw that it was very nearly eight o'clock. He stood up and placed Salz on to his branch.

"Sod it, may as well do something today." Grabbing his wand, he took hold of the Pendant around his neck and apparated to the dungeons. He appeared in a dark, out of the way corner near Snape's office. Trudging over, he knocked.

"Come in," came Snape's voice, and Harry pushed open the door.

Snape's eyebrows rose in surprise as Harry trudged over to the desk.

"Mr. Potter,  
he said slowly, raking his eyes over Harry's dishevelled appearance, and Harry felt uncomfortable like one of the specimens that lined the walls of Snape's office. "I was not expecting you tonight."

"We always have Legilimency lessons on Tuesdays."

"We also have a lesson on Saturdays, yet you failed to attend that, and all of your classes so far this week."

Harry shrugged, his head pounding.

"Manners, Potter."

Harry suppressed a groan as Snape's voice assaulted his head. "Yes, sir."

Snape leaned back and peered at Harry, seeming amused. Finally, he said, "Alcohol is not the answer to your problems, Mr. Potter."

"Really? Why is it then, that you reek of it? Oh, look!" he said sarcastically. "Someone appears to have spilt some all over the front of your clothing!"

Harry looked down and saw a dark stain on the front of his shirt. "Er..."

"No explanation is necessary, Mr. Potter. Take this." Snape moved over to a cabinet and dug around, pulling out a sickly yellow potion.

"Hangover relief. I assure you Mr Potter, if these lessons were not a necessity and I did not need your mind clear, I would most certainly let you suffer, and I would enjoy it."

Harry bit back a retort and took the vial, downing it in one gulp. "Yes sir, thankyou sir." His head felt a small bit better immediately, and he was sure he would be back to normal in a matter of minutes.

"You are lucky I had some on hand. I have already had to hand out some to another student today."

Harry nearly smirked, wondering if it was Malfoy who had felt as bad as he had earlier.

"Go back to your dormitory, Potter. Nowhere else, is that clear? Go to sleep. I will expect you at eight tomorrow, for a lesson. Do not forget to clear your mind."

“Yes, sir.

Harry walked over to the door and opened it, Snape following.

“Oh, and next time, if you would deign to dress accordingly? As these are formal lessons I expect you in uniform.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

The door shut in Harry’s face. “Well,” he muttered, “That could have been worse.”

He couldn’t believe he had gotten away without detention! From Snape, too!

Feeling better by the minute as the potion did its work, he climbed the stairs and made his way through the corridors and up to Gryffindor Tower. Just before he got to the portrait hole, he pulled his cloak over his head and slipped in to the common room when two boys came out.

He didn’t even bother to look around for Ron or Hermione, or to see if Pandora was still disguised as a student. He went straight up to his dormitory.

oOo

The next day, he had free periods all day, so he spent the morning sitting in the common room and catching up on work. He might have been willing to miss classes, but he didn’t really want to fall behind.

Thankfully, no one approached him or otherwise interrupted his work until just after he got back from lunch. A small first year approached him just when he had settled down to work on an Astronomy essay. “Hi, Harry!” he said brightly.

“Er... hi,” replied Harry, having absolutely no idea what the boy’s name was.

“Professor Dumbledore asked me to give this to you.” The boy handed over a small scroll and Harry took it.

“Thanks.”

“Well cya!”

“Bye.” The boy skipped off over to a group of his friends and Harry sighed; he knew this would have been coming. Unrolling the scroll, he read:

Harry,

I require a meeting with you in my office. Please make your way there now.

Sincerely, Albus Dumbledore.

I suppose I’d better get this over with, thought Harry. He trudged up to the office, wondering what the old man would have to say this time.

When he got there, the Gargoyle slid open without him saying a word, and he stepped on to the moving staircase. The door opened as he approached it, revealing Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall.

“Harry, take a seat please.”

Harry did as Dumbledore asked, sitting in the seat next to McGonagall, who was looking at him with a very stern expression.

Dumbledore fixed him with a piercing and slightly sad look. “I fear we have taken the wrong tack with you, my boy.”

Harry snorted, earning a tisk from McGonagall and a sigh from Dumbledore.

"You believe we are trying to control your life, but we are really just trying to keep you safe. You must understand that," he implored.

"I know you want me safe, that's why you keep sending me back to the Dursley's and having me followed everywhere I bloody go."

"Language, Mr. Potter!" reprimanded McGonagall, her tone aghast.

"Harry, I'm sure we can talk about this like adults, without the bad language, don't you think?"

Dumbledore's statement angered Harry a great deal. The tone of his voice was like he was talking to a child.

"Yes sir," replied Harry stiffly.

"Good. Now, what is it about what we have done that you find so objectionable?"

"The fact that you had someone following me around, lying to me every day! How do you expect me to trust anyone when you do things like that?"

"Nymphadora was placed there for your protection!" exclaimed McGonagall.

"And if someone had just told me, I would have had no problem with that! I hate being treated like a child. I've asked people not to – nicely, I might add – but everyone refuses to listen. I mean, you expect me to kill Voldemort, but you keep me in the dark and treat me like I'm five!"

"You are a student, not an adult. It is our job to make sure you are safe!"

Harry threw his arms up in the air at McGonagall's answer. "You all keep saying that! I am safe! I don't want to be treated any differently to anyone else!"

"I'm afraid we cannot do that entirely, Harry," said Dumbledore gently.



"Tough we can in some respects," added McGonagall. "You will serve a detention with each of the teachers whose classes you missed, and there will be thirty points from Gryffindor. I am severely disappointed in you, Mr. Potter."

Harry felt a small pang of guilt, but he swept it aside. He had always liked his head of house, but she had been in on it too.

"Yes, Professor."

"There is one or two other things I would like to ask you Harry."

"What?" asked Harry, his tone belligerent.

"I want you to assure me you have not been leaving the castle. All these times you disappear, nobody knows where you have been. It is quite worrying."

"I'm not leaving the castle."

Dumbledore sighed, but didn't press him.

"Very well, but one last thing." He leaned forward, clasping his hands on the desk and fixing Harry with that piercing stare again. "You have the Map?"

Harry plastered a convincing puzzled look on his face. "No sir... you confiscated it, remember?"

There was a strained silence in the office for the briefest of seconds.

"Oh yes, of course. Forgive me an old man's memory." Dumbledore smiled apologetically.

"Why do you ask, sir?"

Dumbledore waved the question away. "No reason, no reason. Well, off you go, and please, Harry, come and see me if you have anything you would like to talk about."

Not likely. "Yes sir."

Harry sighed in relief as he stepped off the moving stairs and the Gargoyle slid shut behind him. He was exceedingly glad to be out of the stuffy office and away from Dumbledore's knowing gaze.

...

"You must not let your anger control you! You should be controlling it!"

Harry scowled at Snape across the desk. He could now get in to Snape's mind with no difficulty when the man lowered his shields, but he had still had no luck directing thoughts. The longer he tried, the more frustrated Snape got, and the angrier Harry felt about his snide comments.

"I have told you again and again that you must control your emotions. They cloud your judgement and your ability to think logically."

"I'm trying!"

"No, you are not."

"I a-"

"Not nearly hard enough! I have no idea how you became competent in Occlumency when you can allow yourself to become so wound up."

Harry stormed out of the dungeons and up to the Tower. Snape was so infuriating! He'd only had a few Legilimency lessons, and yet Snape expected him to excel at it immediately.

He flung open the portrait hole and strode through the common room.

He glared at Ron and Tonks on the way up, and refused Hermione's attempts to talk. So far, he had done a pretty good job of avoiding them, and, when he couldn't, ignoring them.

oOo

Hey : ) So sorry it took me so long to get this chapter out. I've been really busy. Next chapter will be out in two days and that's a promise. I think this one was a bit slow, not much happened. From now on things should get a bit more fast paced. Also, I've started writing another fic if you want to have a look at it. It won't interfere with me writing this one, PoS is my first priority.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Chapter 27 reviewers:

Ladysavay, Hieadg, vanessa riddle, fufu.a.k., nxkris, Brookslocklear, nintschibintschi, AnnF, draconicflare, call015, Jensindenial3516, Sobocz, litine, La Mariane, fhippogriff, Queen Victoria, ams71080, ubetiburn, Drackner Clawrus.

And...

Elan: Thankyou for reading : ) I think you'll like what I've got planned.

QuannanHade: Yes, I do know what Harry's animagus form is going to be. I won't tell anyone what it is, but if people guess right I'll let them know. By the way, I like your name : ) Thanks a bunch for reviewing.

Ann: smuggle – lol. I'll get around to fixing that eventually. Thanks : )

Kris: hehe, some interesting questions, most of, if not all of which will be answered. Thanks for the review!

:D: Thanks! And thanks for reviewing too. : )

Thanks everyone. Don't know where I'd be without you guys ; )

What with Dumbledore, Snape and his friends, Harry was in an extremely bad mood the next day, which was unfortunate because they were brewing mood enhancing potions and the fumes were really getting to him.

Salz, of course, was trying his best to cheer Harry up by telling him jokes, though the little snake wasn't having much luck. Salz didn't really understand humour too well, but he could still make Harry laugh.

At one stage, Salazar relayed to Harry a particularly humorous joke. Harry answered and hissed out a laugh, before remembering where he was. He glanced up to make sure no one had heard. Unfortunately, it seemed the entire class had heard, and they were all staring at him, some with nervous expressions on their faces. His hopes that no one had heard him were dashed when Hermione said in a whisper, "Harry, wh-who were you talking to then?"

"Indeed, Mr. Potter, I think we would all like to know that," added Snape.

"Er... no one. I didn't say anything." He wasn't a very good liar.

"Harry" squeaked Hermione, "You were talking in Parseltongue."

Harry sent her a heated glare. It was none of their business how he wanted to talk. Why couldn't they just leave him alone? "So what if I was." He said shortly. He picked up a sharp knife and began cutting ingredients.

"Who were you talking to, Mr. Potter?" asked Snape, stalking over to Harry's cauldron.

"No one, sir." He cursed his stupidity. He was usually so careful. He couldn't let them find out that he had Salz.

"No one, Mr. Potter. That hardly seems likely."

"I was talking to myself."

Seamus took up the lead. "Talking to yourself, in Parseltongue? No offence Harry but it's kind of creepy."

"You know it's a sign of madness, talking to yourself, Potter," drawled Zabini.

Harry kept his head down, but glared up at the class through his fringe. "What is this? The Spanish bloody inquisition? Mind your own bloody business!" It came out in English, but it was a harsh hiss, and several of his classmates flinched. Snape looked unnerved. "What is wrong with you, Potter?"

"There's nothing wrong with me."

This time it was Pansy who spoke, in a frightened sort of whisper. "You shouldn't talk like that you know. People don't like it."

Harry jerked his head in her direction and she paled. He said, in the same harsh voice, "Are you scared of me, Pansy?" She paled and looked away.

"Pathetic," murmured Harry.

Hermione started in on him again. "Harry. Harry, she's right you know. You shouldn't talk like that. I mean, there's really no reason to."

"Quiet, Miss Granger. Mr. Potter, I would like an answer to my question."

"I gave you an answer." Harry was starting to get extremely annoyed at the stares of his classmates and Snape's unrelenting need to know.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry ignored him.

"Mr. Potter," snapped Snape, enunciating each word slowly and clearly. "You will answer me!"

You want an answer? Fine. Fine!

He whipped his head up and glared at the entire class. Then, he let loose a string of angry words, including a few choice expletives, letting them know just what he thought of them all. Only, they would never know what he said, because he spoke in Parseltongue. Smirking slightly at their collective flinch and frightened expressions Harry swept from the classroom, ignoring Snape's yells for him to stop.

Harry was furious. As he stormed through the dungeons, he released his fury, keeping up a stream of angry conversation with Salazar and, to his great pleasure, frightening anyone who happened to cross his path with the harsh hisses escaping his lips. Instead of going to Gryffindor tower as he had initially intended, he instead headed for Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. He frightened away two girls who had been giggling by the sinks and opened the entrance to the chamber. Descending the steps, he felt his anger calm as the cool air soothed his mind.

Potions had been his last lesson for the day, so at least he could relax without worrying that a teacher would notice his absence. Crossing the stone platform he came to the hidden door. 'Open,' he hissed, and was rewarded with the harsh scratch of stone. He sighed happily as he stepped through and viewed the grand room beneath him.

It really was a beautiful room, he thought, as he surveyed the view. It was afternoon, and the setting sun was casting the ragged cliffs in a golden light. The valley far below was already cloaked in darkness - it only received sunlight for a short time when the sun was directly overhead – and mist was spreading upwards to claim the cliffs.

"Salazar, it looksss ass if you may have to ssstay here for a while again." Harry watched as Salz curled down his arm.

Harry descended the stairs and collapsed on the lounge. He had no doubt Gryffindor's hourglass had lost a few rubies from that outburst.

Leaning his head back against the back of the lounge, he eventually dozed off.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

He was sitting in a dark room, torches burning on the walls and the smell of rot in the air. In front of him a cowering figure crept forward.

“Wormtail, I have a task for you.” The harsh hissing voice that escaped his mouth was quiet, but the cowed figure flinched. Hatred filled his senses at the cowering man.

“What do you wish, My Lord?” inquired the short, tubby man from his kneeled position on the floor.

“I have a task, suitable for someone of your... talents.”

“Anything, my Lord.”

“I wish you to go to Hogwarts school. After my last offence, that fool Dumbledore has strengthened the wards. I wish to know if your animagus form is still able to slip past. Go.”

The cowering man rose, before bowing and then backing away quickly. “Right away my Lord.”

“Oh, and Wormtail? Call the third circle in.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Harry sneered at the coward’s submissiveness, though he was pleased by it also.

Moments later, a group of fifteen cowed wizards filed in to the room, arranging themselves in a circle around him.

There was silence until he spoke. “I have a mission. We are going to strike a small muggle village. Soon, we shall descend on Pultney, in the south. Take no hostages. I want the muggles to burn, and I want my mark seen by all.”

Silence greeted his words before a wavering voice asked, "M-my Lord, when is the attack to take place?"

He surveyed the asker carefully, making the man shift nervously before answering. "When next I call you."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

Harry bolted awake, his heart racing and his scar aching.

He might be angry with Dumbledore, but he wanted to help, and that meant telling someone what he had seen.

Pulling the Map from his bag and scanning it for Dumbledore's name. The Map showed the Headmaster in his office, along with McGonagall and Mundungus Fletcher. That could mean only one thing; an Order meeting. Harry looked for the other names who were usually there and saw Tonks, Flitwick, Arthur Weasley and Snape all heading in the general direction of Dumbledore's office.

Oddly enough, Snape seemed to be walking away from the portrait of the Fat Lady.

Rolling off the lounge, Harry threw on his invisibility cloak and made his way to the waterfall painting. The walk cleared the sleep from his mind, and the sharp sting of icy water numbed the pain of his scar.

He had just settled on the grass in a painting overlooking the office when Dumbledore called the meeting to order. It was to be a quick meeting.

"I have received an Owl from Remus. On the topic of his mission, he tells me he has not met much success. I fear we acted too late on this matter, though he will stay and try to sway some towards our views."

"Well, we always knew there wasn't really that much hope there, what with the Ministry's laws."



"I also have had no luck," Snape cut in. "The Dark Lord grows increasingly furious about the fact that there is a spy in his ranks. He thought he would find the spy in one of the lesser ranks, but now he is beginning to realise it is someone whom he believed was unflinchingly loyal, or too cowardly to reveal his secrets."

Dumbledore heaved a sigh. "I assume we can expect another attack sometime in the near future?"

Snape nodded curtly. "Quite. He is impatient to find the betrayer."

"And you have no idea?" asked Tonks worriedly.

Snape gave his head a sharp jerk back and forth. "None. He has not even bothered most the Inner Circle with news that there is a spy, though I believe most of them suspect it on their own. I believe he thinks, quite rightly, that if he does, then certain of them may try to find the spy, thereby alerting the spy to the fact that the Dark Lord knows there is one."

"What happened with all that business concerning that Rudd character?" asked McGonagall.

Snape's mouth thinned. "The Dark Lord saw through the ploy in an instant. Rudd was not even able to relay anything of use before he was killed."

"He killed him?!" squeaked Flitwick.

Snape nodded once. "There is no shortage of Death Eaters at the moment, and the Dark Lord sees no use in hanging on to one who allows himself to be caught."

Soon after that, Dumbledore called an end to the meeting.

"Severus, I believe you have a lesson with Harry tonight?"

"Yes, if he bother's to turn up," grumbled Snape.

Harry had completely forgotten about his Legilimency lesson tonight, and was glad he had been reminded. As soon as everyone had left, Harry left the painting world and apparated to the dungeons.

When Snape appeared in the dungeon corridor, Harry was already leaning against the wall in wait.

“Potter.”

“Professor.”

“I was not impressed by your behaviour in class today.”

Harry scowled.

“No one is going to take you seriously if you continue to act like a child.”

“I was not acting like a child!”

Snape opened his office door and led Harry in. “I have told you this before, Potter, and I will tell you again. Throwing a tantrum and running away when you have a disagreement is the act of a child. You might think it rebellious and making a point not to turn up to your classes and ignore the requests of your superiors, but it is not. Start acting like an adult, and people will begin to treat you like one. Even if it takes them a while, they will eventually see that you are becoming your own person and they will treat you as such.”

Harry huffed in a disgruntled manner, annoyed that what Snape said was probably right. He ignored Snape’s knowing smirk.

The Headmaster was interested to know you were still in possession of your little friend. He is of the belief that such a creature is dangerous.”

“Salz is not dangerous!” said Harry, his voice quickly growing louder.

Snape overrode him, saying "That said, no harm seems to have come from your having such a pet thus far. In future, I suggest you watch where you converse with your snake."

Harry opened and closed his mouth in silent disbelief.

"Well, shall we begin?" Snape indicated for Harry to sit, and he did so.

"Er, sir... efore we start, there's something I have to tell you."

"Mm?"

"I had a vision earlier today."

Snape sat up straighter. "You obviously learned something from it, given that you are telling me."

"Yes, most of my visions are just of him hurting people, and whatnot. But this one was of him talking to Wormtail. Voldemort sent him to see if he could get through the new wards that have been put up, and from the way their conversation went, it seemed like Wormtail has been sneaking in to the castle in his animagus form before."

Snape frowned. "He should not have been able to. Wards were erected specifically to keep out animagi after your third year."

Snape was silent for a minute before shaking his head slightly and looking back at Harry. "Well, I shall relay this to the Headmaster. Now, toni-"

"There's more. Sorry, for interrupting. When Wormtail left, he told him to call in the er... third circle, I think. He was planning an attack."

Suddenly, he had Snape's undivided attention.

"He didn't say when it would be specifically, he just said the next time he called them. He's planning the attack on a muggle village called Pultney."

"Is that all you heard?"

Harry struggled to remember. "I think so."

"May I see the memory?"

Harry opened his mouth, surprised at the request. "Oh! I- I suppose so. If it helps." He was a little wary of letting Snape into his mind, but he supposed it was necessary.

Harry brought the memory of his vision to the forefront of his mind, allowing easy access. Minutes later when Snape's presence disappeared from his mind, the Potion's Master was staring off into space, looking thoughtful.

"Sir?"

Snape looked at him. "The man who asked when; he is a Ministry employee, and not on our list of known Death Eaters." Snape scowled as he spoke, but Harry had the distinct feeling that he was pleased.

"Is that all, or can we begin now?" asked Snape, though his tone was not altogether unkind, and Harry was sure that he had even seen a flash of relief on the man's face.

"Yes, that's it."

"Very well, we shall begin as usual. Tonight however, I am going to raise my shields a little. You can now easily gain access when my shields are down, now it is a matter of strengthening that ability."

Harry nodded, understanding, and took out his wand. He couldn't do it wandlessly like Snape could. "Sir, how do you do it without your wand? Isn't it quite a difficult spell?"

"Lots of practice, Potter, over many years."

"Oh." Harry wondered with a shiver how many minds Snape looked into on a daily basis. It was probably why no one ever got away with anything in Snape's class."

Harry realised Snape was looking at him with an amused expression. "I'm afraid, Potter, that looking into the minds of hormone ridden adolescents on a daily basis is not a favourite pastime of mine." Snape smirked and Harry blushed. He had forgotten to re-erect his barriers after letting Snape in to his mind.

After doing so, he pointed his wand at Snape. "Legilimens." There was a brief moment of that cling-wrap feeling before it broke and a much different barrier met him. Oily tendrils grabbed at him, and though he tried to walk, his mental feet kept slipping and he found it extremely difficult to move even a few inches. After five minutes of struggling about in the muck, he was expelled rather forcefully, a wave of dizziness washing over him as his eyes and body adjusted to being back in the office.

"They are the barriers that you are attempting to penetrate. Once you succeed in getting past that level of shielding, I will increase the strength of my shields. However, we will not be focussing on that, as it is not the purpose of these lessons for you to be able to access others' minds without their knowledge."

"What? But-"

Snape held up his hand. "You need to learn a little of that aspect of Legilimency to ensure you do not accidentally go trampling through people's minds. Mostly however, we will be concentrating on controlling thoughts once you are in the mind. This will more effectively allow you to control your own wandering mind."

After that, they tried the same thing a few more times before moving on to the second aspect. Snape lowered all his barriers completely, allowing Harry to slip easily in to the whirl of images, sounds and feelings.

As usual, he had no control whatsoever, and he thought briefly that he should ask Malfoy for another lesson. The Slytherin had a way of explaining things to Harry that was so much simpler than the convoluted way Snape spoke.

Snape sighed when he threw Harry out after yet another unsuccessful attempt. "You simply need to focus more. This is far more difficult than Occlumency, so I don't expect you to pick it up as quickly, but some progress would be beneficial," he said tiredly.

"Is there something I can practice by myself? Some technique or something?"

Snape waved a hand, his elbow resting on the desk. "Some say that practicing wandless magic focuses the mind, and indeed it does, but I cannot have you spending time learning wandless magic simply to progress at Legilimency."

"Why not?"

"Very few wizards are capable of wandless magicks. Even fewer of them are your age. Most are either unusually powerful or just very old and have had a lot of practice."

"Oh... well, I've done wandless magic before."

Snape peered at him curiously. "Really," he said slowly. "Was it accidental?"

"No! I wanted a door to unlock, and it did."

Snape sat back and said after a moment, "Everyone will perform such spells at least once. Were you particularly desperate at the time?"

Harry blushed and pushed the memory of being locked in the cupboard into the depths of his mind. "Maybe a bit."

"Well, there you go. It may have been somewhat intentional, but there was also some element of accidental magic there; a response to a need, rather than just a desire to perform a spell."

Harry wasn't sure if he agreed entirely, but he didn't really feel like getting into a discussion about it either.

Snape had returned to answering Harry's previous question.

“Alternatively, performing activities requiring concentration, such as puzzles can be handy in strengthening mental focus. I suggest you try that. Make sure that they are of a level you find difficult, or you will get little benefit from them.”

Harry nodded, and got up to leave.

ooo

When Harry returned to the dorm that night, he found the reason Snape had been outside the portrait of the Fat Lady. On his pillow was a book labelled ‘Emotional Control for the Raging Adolescent’.

A note was stuck to the cover and he tore it off. Read it, Potter. Harry sneered and scrunched up the note, throwing it across the room where it bounced against the wall and rolled back under Ron’s bed.

Then he turned his pillow over and settled down to read.

.oOo.

After the attack on the school, they were no longer allowed past the edge of the lake, and so Snape had cancelled the remainder of their practical defence lessons, much to the dismay of the entire class.

Harry was disappointed; he had enjoyed the practical lessons, though it did mean that he and Malfoy won the competition, having only one loss when Harry had been absent.

Instead, they were assigned to revision until Snape came up with an alternative. Given that exams were coming up soon and after his conversation with Snape, Harry threw himself in to the studying with surprising eagerness.

He, Seamus and Neville were taking turns quizzing each other between taking notes, Harry ignoring the fact that Ron, Hermione and Tonks were seated at the same table.

He joined in the conversation, but refused to comment on anything those three said, replying only to Dean, Neville and Seamus' comments. When the bell rang, Hermione rushed out with tear in her eyes and Ron followed giving Harry a dirty look. Tonks, still posing as a student, gave Harry a dismayed look and followed them.

"You know, Harry," said Seamus uneasily, "you really should give those guys a break. I don't know what they did, but Hermione seems really upset about it."

"I don't want to talk about it, Seamus. They lied to me after they promised they wouldn't, and that's all there is to it. I just don't trust them anymore. I'll see you in Potions, Seamus. Bye Neville, Dean."

Harry spent the day knuckling down to study, working his way through all the outstanding homework he had before Potions.

oOo

"Next week we will be moving on to our last unit for the term. It is an independent or group project. You are to pick a potion description from the list I will provide and attempt to fabricate a potion which produces similar effects. Once you have done the best you can, you are to compare your potion to any known potions, saying why yours did or did not work. Compare ingredients, methods of preparation, anything that is relevant. You are to hand in a detailed report at the end of the term. I will add that your potion may turn out completely useless, but as long as you provide correct justifications for why it should have worked, you can still obtain a high mark."

Hermione's hand shot into the air.

"Miss Granger?"

"Can we choose our partners?"

"Yes, however if I think it is an unsuitable pairing, I will break it up. You will have one week to make me aware of who you partner with, if anyone, and what description you have chosen."



...

"This assignment actually sounds quite interesting, don't ya reckon, Harry," asked Seamus as they wandered up to dinner after their class.

"Yeah," he agreed, looking through the list of options they had. "Know which one you're going to pick?"

"Nah, not yet. Got a whole week to choose, though."

"Mm."

oOo

After astronomy that night, Harry and Malfoy were, as usual, ensconced in the library, both reading.

"Oh, Potter. I've been meaning to ask you. Can I use some of the basilisk parts. I want to make a potion."

"You don't have to ask me, Malfoy."

"Well, I do, actually, as it is yours. It's the proper thing to do."

Harry waved his hand. "Fine, go right ahead."

"Thanks. Do you want to help? That basilisk has been sitting there for years, just waiting for someone to come along and harvest its parts for potions, and so far the only person whose gotten any use out of them is Severus."

Truthfully, Harry was quite interested in what kind of potions could be made with the rare ingredients that they had access to.

"What kind of potion are you going to make?"

"Well, I was thinking a poison. There are some really nasty ones you can make using basilisk venom or blood."

Harry narrowed his eyes at Malfoy. "And why exactly would you want to make a poison?"

Malfoy sighed dramatically. "Don't be suspicious, Potter. It's purely for interest's sake."

Suddenly, Harry had an idea. "I know one we can make. Hold off till tomorrow, okay? I'll get the instructions for a good one."

He remembered there had been some potions in the little green book he had bought from Knockturn Alley, and he was quite excited at the prospect of making one.

"Alright. I can get some ingredients from Severus, and any he doesn't have in his private stores I can order."

Harry nodded. "I need to ask you something, too. Can we have another Legilimency lesson? I'd really like to learn it."

To his surprise, Malfoy agreed straight away. "Alright, how about tomorrow night. I don't really feel up to it tonight."

"Great! Thanks." He snapped his book shut and stood up. "I'm going to work on my animagus transformation. Want to?"

"Oh, alright."

They both stood and walked in opposite direction to the places where they usually sat.

"Avert your eyes, Potter – I'm taking off my shirt."

"Good to know," said Harry sarcastically, turning around and finding a comfortable position against the wall near the window.

oOo

Hey guys, I'll try to update within three days : )

oOo

Please, please review. You can't see, but I'm actually on my knees, begging.

Thanks to Chapter 29 reviewers:

ams71080, RockIII, La Mariane, black-heart-green-eyes, Vanessa riddle, ladysavay, Jensindenial3516, draconicflare.

and

name: Thanks for reviewing : )

QuannanHade: Thank you! So glad you like it. Yeah, you're right.  
Thanks for reviewing : )

### 30 (Another Superbly Creative Title)

During one lunch, Harry pulled the green book that was written in Parseltongue from his bag.

He leafed through the book, scanning the pages that detailed the brewing of potions. There were several fairly tame ones, as well as some which were not so nice. After a while, he settled on one that looked quite interesting and would challenge them to brew properly.

A poison which instils terrible delusions in the victim's mind until the poison has been stricken from the bloodstream.

That one didn't seem too dangerous to Harry; at least, it had no lasting effects that he could see. Taking out a quill, he copied the instructions and ingredients down on to a piece of parchment and returned the green book to his bag.

...

That night he met Malfoy in Myrtle's bathroom and they went down to the chamber. "I found a potion I think you'll like. We need these ingredients."

Harry pulled out the list and handed it to the Slytherin who perused in quickly before folding it and depositing it in his pocket.

"You wanted a Legilimency lesson tonight?" asked Malfoy.

Harry nodded. "I've been practicing, clearing my mind like you said, but I don't think I'm going to improve much without practical lessons."

...

Harry had to admit, Malfoy's methods of teaching were much better than Snape's. Unlike Snape, Malfoy actually explained things in simple language.

“Don’t try to concentrate on my specific memories that you want to see, because you don’t know them. You can’t find something if you don’t know what it looks like, can you?”

“I suppose not, but the er... book I’ve been reading says you should focus on the memories you want to find. It says it’s all about will power and strength of mind.

“It is, but you don’t have that yet. What I tend to find when starting out is that you focus on your memories. Say for example you want to find a memory of my... I don’t know... boat house. Don’t try to imagine my boat house, because you have no idea what it looks like. Instead, think of a boat house you’ve seen before. If you have enough control, that image will lead my mind to my own boathouse, do you understand?”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. “So it’s kind of like word association, or in this case, memory association?”

“Exactly, yes. The sounds and feelings you associate with a boat house, such as peace and quiet, the feeling of a boat gently rocking – they’ll draw those memories that have similar sounds and feelings out of my mind. Eventually when you’ve had enough practice, you’ll be able to just think of what you want to see and it’ll come to you, but this is a good way to start out.”

“What about slowing down the memories? Last time we practiced, all the images just flew past me until you slowed them down.”

Malfoy frowned. “To be honest, I never really had much trouble with that part. I wanted them to slow down and they just did. Severus says it usually takes longer to be able to do that, but I suppose I just have a natural talent.” Malfoy smirked boastfully.

“Great,” grumbled Harry.

“Well, shall we try? To start with, let’s see if you can find my memory of me eating dinner tonight. What did you eat?”

“I had roast with potatoes.”

“Good, that’s what I had, too, and some vegetables. When you get in my mind, I want you to remember eating your own meal. That will hopefully draw out my memories of eating the same thing. I’ll lower my barriers so you can get straight in.”

Harry nodded and pointed his wand at Malfoy. “Legilimens!”

At once, he had the feeling of being propelled forward, and memories began to rush past him in a blur of colour and sound. Remembering what he was looking for, he brought to mind the dinner he had just eaten. He imagined cutting through one of the potatoes, steam rising from it. He recalled the delicious smell of the roast, and the texture of the gravy. Gradually, the images rushing past him changed.

He still couldn’t discern any in particular, but he could smell food, all kinds of food. Banana, porridge, roast, pumpkin juice.

There was a golden sort of glow to most of them and he could hear the chatter of hundreds of people, and continuous clinking sounds.

He attempted to slow them down, focussing solely on seeing the images. For some reason, the golden ambience disappeared.

He concentrated harder, but after a few minutes nothing had happened and Malfoy threw him out.

Malfoy pinched the bridge of his nose. “No. No, no, no.”

Harry frowned. “What?”

The Slytherin sighed. “You did alright to begin with, calling up similar images, but then you lost it completely when you tried to slow it down.”

“What did I do wrong?”

“You lost your focus. Completely.”

“No I didn’t. I wa-”

"If I say you lost it, you lost it, Potter. You were concentrating too hard on trying to slow down all the images, and so you lost the more specific images you had drawn in. What you should have done was try to locate more specific memories, then choose one and try to slow that down. Slowing down more than one is too difficult at this stage," explained Malfoy.

"Well how am I supposed to locate more specific memories than what I did?"

Malfoy clicked his tongue, thinking. "Did you notice there was a golden sort of glow when you drew in those memories?" He continued at Harry's nod. "Well that was because a lot of the memories you brought up were of me eating in the Great Hall, which is lit by candles. Although, it wasn't just memories of dinner; it was breakfast and lunch too. Some were also of me eating in other places."

"So I should have also imagined specifically eating in the Great Hall?"

Malfoy nodded. "Precisely."

After that, they practiced a few more times. Harry succeeded in drawing in fewer memories, but he still had no luck in slowing them down whatsoever, and Malfoy couldn't offer him any helpful hints. They stopped when Malfoy got too frustrated with Harry to bother keeping going.

"Aagh! Let's just give it a rest now, eh?" groaned the Slytherin, leaping up. "You have no finesse at all; it's like a damn whirlwind in my mind!"

Sighing, Harry leaned back against the lounge, agreeing they should give it up for the night.

oOo

The next morning, Harry was searching through his trunk for his Ancient Runes textbook. Pulling aside his robes, he saw his pair of

omnioculars that he had bought at the World Quidditch Match he had attended with the Weasleys.

An idea formed in his mind and he put the omnioculars in his pocket before heading to class.

oOo

“Legilimens.” Harry slipped into Snape’s mind, immediately becoming surrounded by whirlwind sounds and colours.

Determined to slow the memories down this time, he put both hands up to his eyes. Nothing happened for a few moments and then Snape suddenly threw him out.

“What on Earth are you doing, Potter?”

“I just want to try something.”

Snape gave him a look that said he was odd, but Harry ignored it and incanted the spell again. Again, he put his hands up to his eyes, mimicking holding omnioculars.

It was when he had been fishing through his trunk for his Ancient Runes textbook that he had hit upon an idea for controlling the memories in his Legilimency lesson.

Snape had taught him in Occlumency that it was sometimes beneficial to visualise things in your mind, like when they had engaged in the mental duel.

Perhaps, if he imagined that he was looking through omnioculars, it would provide a way for him to slow the images down. It was still will-power, but the idea provided a familiar situation and a more visual method. Of course, it may not work at all. Either way, it was worth a try.

He had spent lunchtime familiarising himself with the omnioculars, relearning the controls of them, and now he moved his finger in the motion that replayed things back in slow motion.



At first nothing happened, but he kept doing the movement and gradually the images that he had drawn in slowed. They didn't slow by much, but it was enough that he could distinguish some of the quickly spoken words.

Unfortunately, he couldn't slow them down enough to really look at any of the memories any clearer, but it was progress.

"Thank Merlin. I was beginning to think we would never make any progress," said Snape dryly when he had expelled Harry from his mind.

Harry grinned.

"What is it you were doing differently this time? Or is it simply the appalling amount of time we have spent practicing?" asked Snape tiredly.

"One holiday, Mr. Weasley took us to see the Ireland versus Bulgaria Quidditch Match. We brought these omnioculars, and I thought simulating using a pair would help me." Harry shrugged, still grinning at his success.

Snape rolled his eyes and favoured Harry with a sneer. "Of course, Quidditch. Why did I not think of it myself?" he said sarcastically. He took a seat, and shaking his head he murmured to himself, "Whatever works, I suppose."

"I only did it because of what you taught me," pointed out Harry, and Snape raised an eyebrow.

"And what, pray tell, have I ever told you about that involves Quidditch?"

"Not Quidditch! When we were learning Occlumency, we practised visualising things in my own mind to help block you out. It's the same sort of thing."

"I suppose it is, yes. Speaking of Occlumency, I assume you have been keeping your shields up at all times?"

Harry nodded.

"Good, let's see them. Legilimens."

Harry had not been expecting the attack, but his shield held. He could feel Snape's presence falling, occasionally finding a purchase on something, but mostly just falling through the endless black space that made Harry's barriers.

After a few minutes, he expelled Snape from his mind.

Snape nodded grudgingly. "You have improved. Your shields are stronger and you seemed to throw me out quite easily."

Harry couldn't help grinning again, earning a scowl from Snape.

"Get out, Potter, before you make me sick."

...

That night as he was preparing for bed, a sharp shooting pain ripped through his scar, bringing him to his knees. He cleared his mind as best he could, bringing all of his shields up and the pain gradually faded away.

oOo

On Wednesday, Harry got some lunch from the kitchens and went down to the chamber with Malfoy so they could start brewing the potion.

"I like the look of this potion," said Malfoy, rubbing his hands together before assembling the potions ingredients in the order they were going to use them.

Harry snorted. "You just like it because it's a poison. You do promise you're not going to use it on anyone, don't you?"

“Can’t say I’ve got anyone in mind,” said Malfoy lightly.

Harry narrowed his eyes. “You’d better not.”

Malfoy half-filled the small cauldron they were using with water and lit a fire beneath it while Harry started chopping some gillyweed into perfectly even pieces.

After partnering with Malfoy all year, he had picked up some of the Slytherin’s meticulous methods when it came to preparing ingredients.

An hour later, they set the potion to simmer.

“Well, that’s all we can do for now. It has to stew for at least twelve hours and no more than twenty four,” said Harry, consulting the parchment he had scribbled instructions on. They began cleaning up the area, wiping down the table and packing away the unused ingredients.

“I’ve been thinking, Potter. We should partner for the last potions assignment.”

Harry was surprised; he hadn’t even considered that Malfoy would want to remain partners now that they could choose who they wanted to go with.

Malfoy correctly read his expression. “We’ve been partners all year, and I have to admit I wasn’t thrilled with it, but we’ve gotten good marks and this assignment is a big one, so it’s much easier to share the workload with someone else. Plus, Blaise is with Pansy and I’m not going with Goyle.”

Harry shrugged. “I suppose, I don’t really mind either way. Have you read through the list of options?”

Malfoy nodded enthusiastically. “I was thinking number two looked interesting. What do you think?”

“Er, well, I haven’t had a look yet.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Of course you haven't. Well, have a look and let me know what you think. We have to tell Snape what partners we have and what potion we're brewing next lesson."

They moved over to the lounge and Harry dug around in his bag for the sheet of parchment Snape had copied for all the students in the class. There were five options to choose from.

A potion that will alter the colour of one's hair. Extra points will be awarded if the colour can be chosen.

A healing potion which is effective on broken bones and/or flesh wounds.

A concoction which when ingested causes the drinker to grow temporarily taller.

A brew which when rubbed into the skin clears blemishes.

A potion which mimics the effects of an anaesthetic.

Alternative concepts may be discussed with me. Extra points are given if the potion has no serious unintended side effects.

Harry perused the list for a while. Number two did look interesting, but he liked number three as well. He told his opinion to Malfoy.

"Don't be ridiculous," he scoffed. "Number three is the easiest one on there. It's for people who want an easy but low mark. Snape put it on there for the uncreative people, like Goyle, who'll fail if they

Harry scowled. "Alright, fine. I was just saying it looked interesting."

"Not really," replied Malfoy indifferently.

Harry's anger fired up. "You know it really annoys me when you do that!"

"Do what?" droned Malfoy.

“Act like your opinion is the only one that’s right. I say something and you tell me I’m wrong, when it’s something that doesn’t even have a right or wrong answer!”

“Sorry,” replied the Slytherin indifferently, not looking up from his book.

Growling in annoyance and frustration, Harry stalked out of the chamber. He knew he probably shouldn’t get so annoyed, but he had been employing the techniques described in the book Snape had given him about emotional control. In doing so, he really hadn’t had any outlet for his anger, and it was coming out now.

Walking to calm himself down a bit, he made his way up to Myrtle’s bathroom and headed towards Gryffindor Tower.

“Harry, my boy!” came a bright voice from behind him. Harry groaned silently; he really wasn’t in the mood to talk about his behaviour.

“Good evening Professor Dumbledore,” he replied, as politely as he could manage.

“Off to Gryffindor Common Room for the night?” asked the headmaster, popping a lolly into his mouth.

“Yes sir.”

“Excellent. I was wondering if I might walk with you. I was hoping to tell you some excellent news.”

Harry looked curiously at Dumbledore. “What’s that, sir?”

“I am pleased to inform you that we were able to foil an attack on the small village of Pultney yesterday evening. Professor Snape informs me we have you to thank for this.”

Harry brightened considerably at Dumbledore’s words. “That’s excellent sir!”

“Indeed it is. A hundred innocent muggles will continue to sleep soundly in their beds.” Dumbledore drew Harry to a halt and cast a silencing charm around them. “I tell you this in confidence, Harry,” he continued in a low voice. “Not only were those in the village saved, but if all goes well, also Professor Snape’s position as a spy. It would not be good for us if we were to lose that.”

Harry blinked at the little piece of information that had been handed to him, even if he did already know it from spying on the Order, “That’s great, sir.”

“Indeed it is.” Dumbledore squeezed Harry’s shoulder before turning to leave. “Good things happen when people work together.”

Harry wandered in to the common room, wondering if Dumbledore’s last comment was a hint.

...

Harry went to bed straight away. He was excited that his information had helped the Order, and wondered if him learning Legilimency was really the best course of action. Admittedly, it was painful when he had vision and he was thankful that they were starting to decrease, but what was a bit of temporary pain if it save a hundred lives?

For the first time in a long time, Harry didn’t clear his mind before he went to sleep. Instead, he filled his mind with images of Voldemort and the cloaked figures that stood behind him.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Shadowy figures stood circled around him, and he fumed in anger at the audacity of one who must stand in this circle.

“Logan. Step forward.”

A man moved shakily in front of him, and he sneered in disgust at the waves of fear that rolled off of him.

“One of you.” he said delicately as Nagini curled around him, “has betrayed me.”

The man in front of him paled ever so slightly. “Tonight we will find out who.”

He turned his full attention to the man who kneeled before him. “Look at me,” he commanded, and after a pause the man did so, his eyes flitting to his, then away, and then back again. Before he could look away again, he threw himself into the man’s mind, searching his memories for an answer.

He could feel the man’s pure terror, but the memories he viewed showed a pathetically cowed man who truly desired to rid the world of mudbloods.

After a minute he was satisfied that Logan, though weak, was indeed loyal.

“Logan. You are a faithful follower. Step back. Monterey, step forward.”

Another man appeared before him, this one more confident. Again, he delved into the man’s mind.

...

A full hour later, he had finished with each of the wizards that made up his Third Circle of Death Eaters, and his frustration and anger had grown with each man that passed his test.

He surveyed the men before him, his nostrils flaring in anger.

These men were weak, that he knew. None of them was powerful or talented enough to hide their mind from him.

Nobody was; he was the greatest Legilimens in the world. And yet, none of them appeared to be the spy. He was not pleased by their loyalty; he was angered by what it meant - he was forced to conclude that the spy was not one of his lowly ranked minions, but someone he

had thought trustworthy, someone from the second circle or the Inner circle.

He raged.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~

“Mate, wake up! Harry!”

He was shaken awake by Ron, though he barely registered that; the pain in his head was so great. Voldemort was furious.

He groaned loudly, biting his lip to try and prevent the scream that wanted to rip its way out of his lungs.

“Seamus, go and get McGonagall and Pomfrey,” hissed Ron.

Harry made a noise of disagreement and shook his head furiously, though he halted abruptly when it made his head worse. “Nuhhh.” He pushed himself into a sitting position. “Ng. Don’t.”

“Harry mate, you need some help. You were screaming like a banshee, and you’re obviously in pain.”

Harry pushed himself out of his bed, pushed his glasses on to his nose and stumbled slightly on his way to the door, shrugging Ron’s helping hand away.

“Harry...”

“Don’t bother,” he grunted, leaving the four boys staring unsurely after him from the door of the dormitory.

He staggered through the corridors, thankfully not running in to Filch on his way down to Snape’s office. He didn’t know if Snape would be there at this time of night, but he really needed some of the pain relief potion that Snape had given him last time he’d had a vision this bad. The normal type that was dispensed in the infirmary wasn’t strong enough.



Harry massaged his temples as he walked, but it didn't really help. His head still felt like it was splitting in two.

After what seemed like ages, he arrived at Snape's office. The corridor was completely dark, and he had forgotten his wand.

He felt for the door and knocked, but after a minute of waiting he decided Snape mustn't be in there. He wasn't surprised, really; it was early in the morning.

He contemplated going to Snape's quarters, but he couldn't quite remember how to get there.

Bracing himself for what he knew would happen, he gritted his teeth and turned the handle, trying to push the door open. A split second later, he was slammed backwards into the wall, his head spinning.

The pain became too much, and he threw up before slumping against the wall to wait for Snape.

He didn't have to wait long before Snape swept around the corner, his dark robes billowing behind him. It was a second before he spotted Harry shivering against the wall.

His expression of fury dropped from his face as he saw the state Harry was in, and he knelt, peering into Harry's eyes.

"Come on Potter. Get up."

Harry struggled up, surprised when he felt Snape pulling him up by the arm. The Potion's Master led Harry into his office and sat him down before going over to a cabinet and returning with the familiar potion.

Harry gulped it down, sighing in relief when it took the edge off his pain. "And this," said Snape, handing him a murky orange potion. Harry took it without question and found that it was a stomach-settling potion. "Thanks," he grunted, leaning forward and resting his head in his hands, waiting for the potions to have more of an effect.

Snape sat quietly in his chair, waiting for Harry to speak.

After ten minutes, Harry stopped feeling like he was going to throw up again. "He's angry. Unbelievably angry," he said, not moving from his position.

Snape's voice was quiet when he spoke. "Why?"

"The spy. He was so sure after the attack on Pultney failed that it was someone from the Third Circle. He called them all, and read their minds one by one. Now he knows it's somebody closer to him."

Snape sighed in defeat, sitting back and running a hand through his lank hair. There were several minutes of silence before Snape spoke again. "Did you clear your mind tonight?"

"Yes," he lied, not really in the mood to have Snape berate him.

Snape looked as if he did not quite believe the lie, but did not pursue the issue. "Very well. Are you well enough to walk back to your dormitory by yourself?"

Harry nodded, though he felt a bit weak. "Are you going to tell Dumbledore?"

"There is a meeting for the Order tomorrow evening, I will inform them then."

Harry stood slowly, but his head still spun and he wobbled slightly. Snape was up in an instant and at his side. "I will escort you to the infirmary and you will spend the remainder of the night there."

Snape helped Harry up to the infirmary, keeping a steadying hand on his shoulder, though by the time they reached the hospital wing Harry was feeling a fair bit better.

Harry hopped into his usual bed while Snape watched.

"All done?" asked Snape. Harry nodded.

Snape extended his hand. "Glasses."

Harry pulled off his glasses and put them in Snape's hand, feeling a little too much like he was being tucked in for his liking.

"Remember to clear your mind." Snape gave him a final look and was gone. Harry fell asleep immediately.

oOo

"Ron told me about how you woke up screaming last night, and he said it's not unusual."

"It's none of your concern, Hermione."

Harry had been descended upon by Hermione as he sat in the common room working on an assignment.

"Please stop ignoring us, Harry. We're your friends; you can't stay mad at us forever."

"I don't know how you can claim to be my friend when you blatantly lied to me."

"We're sorry!" she cried. "We know it was wrong, it's just that at the time, it seemed like we were doing the right thing!"

"Uh huh."

"You need us," she insisted.

"Not anymore," he replied coldly, ignoring her stricken expression. She wrung her hands as he continue writing. After a few moments, she gave a soft sob and escaped up the stairs to the girls dormitory, closing the door loudly behind her.

oOo

During their lunch break that day, Harry and Malfoy met to continue the potion. It was time to add the basilisk blood, and Malfoy was especially excited about the result it would have.

Harry measured out 16mL of the red liquid from the large jar they had and brought it over to the cauldron. It was extremely potent, so not much was required.

“Now remember, you need to pour it in at a constant rate while I’m stirring. And I need to stir three times clockwise, two times anticlockwise, seven times clockwise.”

Harry nodded as Malfoy dipped the glass stirring rod into the potion, which was currently a greenish colour with a sluggish consistency.

Harry positioned the vial above the potion and at the exact instant Malfoy began to stir, he slowly tipped the basilisk blood in. The swirl of red disappeared quickly as Malfoy stirred, and when he had completed the step, they both stood back and waited with bated breath for the result.

For a moment it looked as if there would be no visible effect, but then the potion sputtered, and with a fizz of bright sparks that started in the middle and spread out wards, the potion turned a radiant orange, and the potion began to spin in the cauldron, as if it was being stirred quickly.

“Cool...” murmured Malfoy, and Harry nodded his head in agreement.

oOo

“You should all have decided on your choice for the final assessment,” began Snape, prowling between the desks in the Potions classroom. “I have left a sheet of parchment on my desk, and by the end of the lesson I expect everyone’s name to be written on it, along with the option you have chosen.”

He then began with his usual pre-practical lecture. Shortly before the end of class, Malfoy went up to Snape’s desk and wrote their names down, putting the number 2 next to them.

oOo

Snape had told him there was an Order meeting that evening, so he kept an eye on the Map and made his way there when people started to gather in the office. There hadn't been a meeting at Grimmauld Place for a while and he wondered why.

As it turned out, there were only four people at the meeting; Dumbledore, Snape, McGonagall and Tonks.

"I have... unfortunate news," began Snape. "I believe the Dark Lord is unconvinced that the spy is in the group who were to attack Pultney," said Snape slowly, his voice quiet. Harry wondered why Snape didn't say that he had had a vision.

There were murmurs of dismay from Tonks and McGonagall and Dumbledore sighed. "I should not have hoped it would be so easy to throw him off."

"We shall simply have to find some other way of doing so," said McGonagall, her voice filled with worry.

"I will endeavour to gather as much information as I can as quickly as I can," replied Snape. "We cannot expect that my position will not be revealed now that the Dark Lord is certain of a spy in his highest ranks."

"Why does he think the spy is not from the Third Circle?" asked Tonks. "We prevented the attack, surely he believes the spy must be there."

Snape looked down his nose at her. "The Dark Lord is the greatest Legilimens in history. It is no task for him to breach the deepest recesses of a man's mind and find the truth."

"Maybe we can frame someone?" suggested Tonks.

"How many times have we tried that?" asked Snape. "And how many times has it failed. You are being naive, Nymphadora. We must

accept that my position will be compromised,” Snape snapped impatiently.

“How much time do you think we can expect?”

Snape paused for a moment, thinking before he answered. The Second Circle consists of about ten individuals. Of those he may suspect Crabbe or Goyle to begin with. Those two are more like sheep than blindly faithful. Avery is someone that is easily swayed by a bribe, though he is certainly loyal. Most of the rest spent a decade in Azkaban for him, so he probably won’t suspect them, unless he thinks one of them is trading his secrets for clemency.”

“And the Inner Circle?” asked McGonagall.

“The Inner Circle consists of Rabastan, Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestranger, Lucius Malfoy, Malcolm Nott, Septimus Thorne, and myself, of course. None of us are easily influenced, and I cannot imagine which of us he might expect. Most certainly not any of the Lestrangers. At any rate, it depends how he goes about it. If he decides to simply perform Legilimency on us all, I could have days at the most. If he decides to launch attacks and see which ones fail then weeks or even months.”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t go next time he calls?” suggested McGonagall, the concern in her tone evident.

“Snape gave her a look like she was simple. “And prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am the spy, Minerva?”

“Better than you being dead!” she returned, her tone becoming fiery.

Snape rolled his eyes. “I’m quite sure that is coming anyway, Minerva.”

McGonagall gasped softly. “Severus! Do not speak like that!”

...

After the meeting, Harry met up with Malfoy to practice their animagus transformations.

“Have you been practicing?” asked Malfoy as they entered the library.

Harry shook his head. “No. I haven’t really had much time lately.”

They each sat in their own space, Harry removing his shoes and Malfoy taking off his shirt so it didn’t rip.

There was silence in the library for over forty minutes before Malfoy finally experienced a new transformation. Harry opened his eyes when he heard the Slytherin begin to move around. He got awkwardly to his knees and then his feet, his tiny hands flopping uselessly.

Malfoy was even taller and broader than he had been previously, and looked like he was about to pop out of his pants.

“I think I might have to start borrowing Vincent’s clothes if I’m going to keep practicing,” he said.

“Our transfiguration book says that you can change your clothes as part of the transformation.”

“Hm, I think that’ll take a bit more practice though.”

“Yeah, probably. Maybe you should try visualising your clothes changing as well,” suggested Harry.

Malfoy nodded. “It’s worth a try, I suppose.”

“Hey!” said Harry suddenly. “Your teeth are sharp. Did that just happen today?”

Malfoy walked to the mirror and bent down close to it, opening his mouth wide. “Yeah, I think so! Wicked! Did you have any luck?”

Harry shook his head. “No, although I felt that weird tingling feeling all over my face, so I think I’m close to another one.”

Afterwards they spent some time working on assignments.

“Do you want to meet up again tomorrow some time?”

Malfoy shook his head. “I can’t. My father is taking me out of school for the weekend.”

Harry sat up. “What! Why?”

Malfoy was quiet for a moment. “I don’t know.”

“It’s not-”

“I don’t know, okay!?” Malfoy’s usually calm exterior became suddenly ruffled; he looked slightly worried.

They went back to their work in silence, and Harry spoke over five minutes later. “You could just not go,” he said softly.

Malfoy didn’t reply.

oOo

Another chapter done! Please review and tell me what you think. Australia Day today! Free beer for all reviewers, or Malibu and coke if that’s more to your taste. Yummy.

Updating in less than a week.

oOo

Thank you so much to everyone who reviewed the last chapter. Everyone is so encouraging : )

name, La Mariane, black-heart-green-eyes, ams71080, Jensindenial3516, Vanessa riddle, Kris, Arkenstone007, Emerald Eyes of Flame, celestral, mountainwizard, Ash Knight, fufu.a.k..



The next morning Harry attended Quidditch practice. They had their last match coming up in a week, Gryffindor versus Slytherin for the Quidditch Cup. Their team was in fine form, apart from the rift that had formed between captain and keeper in recent weeks.

Unlike Hermione, Ron had not approached him, choosing to keep his distance from Harry and his anger. He hadn't even scowled at Harry, which surprised him greatly. Ron was usually quite outward with his emotions, but he hadn't even so much as caught Harry's eye.

The practice went well, and Harry was feeling fairly confident about the upcoming match against Slytherin.

As they were leaving the pitch, the Slytherin team arrived, and Harry noticed Malfoy's absence with a burst of worry. As far as he knew, it wasn't a regular occurrence for Lucius Malfoy and Harry wondered at the reason for Draco's weekend away.

Perhaps it was for completely benign reasons, but Harry had a dreaded feeling.

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his sweaty hair. As long as Draco didn't return with a great ugly mark on his arm, Harry was happy. It wasn't that he liked Malfoy that much; they weren't friends per se, but over the year they had developed a comfortable sort of companionship that Harry could rely on. He felt certain that if Malfoy were to follow his father and become a Death Eater that he couldn't in good conscience continue to associate with Malfoy, and he felt that the Slytherin would probably feel the same way. Although, Harry thought wryly, he doubted that it would be in good conscience on Malfoy's part.

...

During the day, Harry briefly visited the chamber to finish the potion he and Malfoy had been brewing. It had only needed to stew longer before being siphoned into vials and Harry performed the task easily. After six years of Potions, he could siphon with his eyes closed.

It was still rapidly spinning in the cauldron when he arrived, despite the fact that it hadn't been stirred since the previous evening. It was still bright orange, and emitted the occasional spark.

As soon as Harry lowered the siphon into it, the potion went dead still in an instant. He measure out two equal vials, there was just enough to fill two small vials. He pocketed them and left the chamber.

...

That evening after dinner Harry had a Legilimency lesson with Snape. He was feeling particularly optimistic now that he had found a way of slowing the images down. Hopefully tonight he would be able to slow down the memories enough that he could view a memory entirely.

"Tonight I want you to attempt to access memories of me marking assignments. Try to imagine the tedium that provides me and I'm sure you'll have no trouble locating memories," said Snape dryly. "Once you feel you have some, pick one only and try to slow it down completely."

Harry nodded and pointed his wand. "Legilimens."

As soon as the whirl of memories descended upon his senses, he recalled the methods Malfoy had taught him. He had never personally marked anyone's assignments, although he had read through Ron's and Hermione's many times; Ron's to check over and compare, Hermione's to copy.

He focussed his thoughts on comparing a potions essay he had written with Ron's, remembering the smell of parchment and ink, and the frustration he sometimes felt when he couldn't quite get it long enough. Soon, a great many memories dropped back, still leaving a lot in the foreground of Snape's mind. Some of them, Harry reasoned, would be of Snape marking essays, while others would most likely be of him writing them or simply reading anything on parchment that frustrated him.

To narrow down the images more, Harry focussed on Snape's office, the cold stone walls, the jars of dead things, and the big wooden desk. Even more images dropped away.

There were still hundreds; after all, Snape probably marked essays every night, and he had been teaching for sixteen years. One thing that allowed him to concentrate better was the fact that most of these images seemed were now of Snape seated at his desk, and he stopped feeling as if he were sitting in one chair, then another, then standing, the light going from daylight to candlelight and back again. It was much less disorienting.

There were still too many images for him to draw in one particular one, so he wracked his mind for something else to narrow it down.

With a wry smile, he focussed on his own name, written messily in black ink on an essay entitled 'The Use of Moonstone in Everlasting Elixirs.' It had been a revision of the subject matter from first term, and he had handed it in only a few days ago.

Immediately, all images but a few dropped away. He supposed all the memories that now circled him must all be of Snape marking his essays. He squinted, but couldn't tell which was the one he wanted. He brought his hands up to his eyes; this time when he imagined the omioculars a pair actually appeared in his hands, though they were slightly different to the pair in his trunk. They only had one knob, and he turned it repeatedly. After a few full turns, things began to slow down and he was able to distinguish some of the words that whipped around him. "Aha!" he yelled. He had spotted a memory of Snape marking the Everlasting Elixirs essay, and he mentally threw himself toward it before it was again hidden in the other memories.

He found himself in Snape's office, standing now. Snape was bent low to see the essay clearer in the dying light of the candle, which had begun to sputter on its short wick. Harry walked closer and bent down, ascertaining that it was in fact his recently written essay.

Snape was muttering to himself, though Harry only caught a few words. "Ridiculous," he muttered, drawing a red line through a

sentence. “Dunderhead...” Snape shook his head. Harry scowled. It wasn’t that bad. He thought he’d done a good job writing it.

Harry continued to watch as Snape gave an affirmative grunt and passed over the next few paragraphs without scratching out anything he had written and finally came to the end of the essay. The Potions master paused for a few moments, considering, and then scripted a neat red E in the upper right corner of his work.

Harry grinned, and then he was propelled from Snape’s mind.

“A marked improvement,” stated Snape, referring to Harry’s Legilimency.

“I only got an E?” asked Harry, though he was smiling. “I thought I would get full marks on that one.”

Snape rolled his eyes. “It was very nearly an O, though you neglected to mention that Moonstone actually aids in prolonging the life of the potion, which brought your mark down considerably. You did however receive extra marks for stating that Moonstone acts as a nullifier for the adverse effects of dragon blood, which you would have only known if you read more than your assigned potions manual, something I certainly didn’t expect of you.”

Harry smirked smugly.

“Back to the topic at hand,” said Snape, raising an eyebrow at the expression on Harry’s face. “As I said, a marked improvement. I assume you were looking for that specific image?”

Harry nodded. “Not at first, though. I narrowed it down to you marking assignments, but there were too many for me to slow down and choose one to view, so then I thought of seeing what I got in that assignment. I thought about my name written on parchment and then I managed to slow those images down enough to see the one I wanted, and then I sort of... pushed... myself into it.”

Snape nodded. "Good. Your method for slowing the memories down certainly seems effective; you have gone from not being able to do it at all to viewing a memory with ease in only two lessons."

"So what now?"

Snape sneered. "You are not ready to progress just yet, Potter. Do not think it will be so easy every time. That was a very specific memory you were searching for; you wrote the essay and you know in great detail what my office looks like, so you knew exactly what you were looking for. Say you were seeking a certain bit of knowledge from my mind, but you have no idea where I came by that knowledge. You would have absolutely no idea what it is you are searching for, and it would take you far longer to narrow the images down, if you could even do that. We need to get you to the stage where you simply think of what it is you want to know and the relevant images simply spring forward."

Harry wrinkled his nose in thought.

"For example," continued Snape, "The other day I found myself, in the course of a business deal, believing that I was being short-changed, shall we say, in my purchase. I performed Legilimency on the man, wanting to view the memory of how he came by what he was now selling me. All I knew about that event was what he bought, as I was now buying it. I didn't know where he bought it, when, from whom, but the memory instantly appeared before me, showing me all I needed to know. It takes a great deal of time and practice to get to this level of control, and you may never get there. However, you need more control than you have. We need to stop your mind from wandering on its own."

Harry nodded. "I've been reading the book you left me," he said, and he could have sworn the corner of Snape's mouth twitched.

"Have you now? And has it been useful for you?"

Harry narrowed his eyes; he had the feeling Snape was silently laughing at him. "Yes, I suppose. I've been using some of the

techniques to help keep my anger under control, and it helps me clear my mind.”

Snape nodded. “And have you been doing mind puzzles as I suggested?”

Harry paused before shaking his head. He had completely forgotten to look for some.

“Mental control is a difficult thing to achieve. You will not progress without working at it. An exercise I frequently used in my training was to keep lists, to memorise things. Try writing down a sequence of numbers. Look at them for a few minutes, cover them up, and then try to write them all down. The more you practice, the easier you will find it to hold the information in your head. Alternatively, you might want to try memorising potions ingredients, incorporating the exercise into your study. As time goes on, you will find it easier to memorise longer lists or longer numbers.”

Harry nodded.

“Something else you can do is exercises that arise as you go about your day to day life. Say for example that you develop an itch – refrain from scratching it. It takes mental control to avoid something so easy, something that begs our immediate attention.”

Snape had him try once more to view a memory, this time of Snape visiting a place called Chateau Luin, a place that Harry had never heard of, let alone seen. All he had to go on was the name. It went without saying that he failed miserably, unable to draw any images at all closer to him. He thought perhaps that Snape was doing it more to prove a point than actually teach him anything this time; to remind Harry not to get carried away with his previous success.

oOo

On Sunday Harry spent the day in the chamber, putting in a few good hours of solid study before attempting the memory exercise that Snape had mentioned. He had taken the Potion Master’s advice in

using the exercise to study and was memorising the long list of ingredients used for the Draught of Living Death.

He had originally tried numbers, writing down a list of twenty two digit ones and attempting to remember them, but he had found it tedious and difficult. Memorising ingredients was much easier, but still a challenge, especially with a potion that had so many ingredients.

After a good hour of that, he gave it up for another idea that Snape had dismissed. It was a topic he was interested in and he had done it before; wandless magic.

He pondered for a moment before tossing his wand aside. He knew that the last time he had done this - unlocking his cupboard at the Dursley's – had been more an act of need with an element of accidental magic than plain skill, but he thought it would be worth giving it a try. After all, he had found himself before Voldemort without a wand on a number of occasions, and it wouldn't hurt being able to do a simple accio or even a stupefy without a wand.

He knelt at the low table that was in front of the lounge, facing away from the window so he wasn't distracted by the mesmerising view. He focussed on the wand, wondering if he should get a book on wandless magic before he actually tried it. He didn't know if you were supposed to do the movement with your hand, or your whole arm, or if you just held up your hand.

It was for this reason that starting with an accio was a good idea; it had no wand movement, like a lumos, you simply held the wand up. He extended his hand towards his wand until it was mere centimetres away.

He concentrated for a few minutes, clearing his mind before incanting. "Accio." Nothing happened and he tried again. "Accio." Again, nothing. He clucked his tongue, thinking.

In the end, he decided to continue practicing the summoning spell, reasoning that he would get a book to read later and try the lumos spell another time, as it was easier.

His wand didn't move until he picked it up and stuffed it into his pocket after an hour of practicing, but he reigned in his frustration; he couldn't expect to succeed after so short a time.

oOo

On Monday morning, Harry made his way to the Great Hall for breakfast and searched the Slytherin Table with a feeling of expectation. Malfoy wasn't there when he arrived, but ten minutes later he entered the hall surrounded by a knot of Slytherins. He was looking tired and drawn, but he had his usual smirk pasted on his face, and Harry wasn't really sure if that should alleviate his fears at all.

He resumed eating his breakfast, listening to Dean and Seamus' conversation as he did so until the owls streamed into the Great Hall. He had used one of the school barn owls to send Malfoy his vial of the potion, along with a short note.

Malfoy looked across the Hall and gave a brief and almost imperceptible shake of his head, pocketing the vial as he did so.

Harry frowned and went back to eating his bacon. Malfoy had said once that their 'association' would end when he took the mark, but as time had passed Harry had begun to think that that wasn't true. Surely Malfoy wouldn't cut all ties?

The thought worried him more than he would have thought; he spent the whole day stewing on what had happened over the weekend, not able to approach Malfoy in any of their classes to ask.

After dinner, he waited impatiently for Malfoy outside the Slytherin Common Room, skulking against the wall under his invisibility cloak.

Not long after he arrived, Malfoy approached with a group of his friends. Harry huffed in annoyance, but luckily Malfoy detached from the group and continued on. Harry stepped up beside him as he walked by. "Malfoy!" The Slytherin jerked.



“Shite, Potter!” You don’t sneak up on people in dark corridors!” whispered Malfoy harshly, an annoyed look appearing on his face.

“Where’d you go this weekend?” he asked, ignoring Malfoy’s comment and cutting straight to the point.

“None of your damned business!” spat Malfoy.

“Whe-”

“Home.”

“Get any nice skulls burned into your skin while you were there?”

“Shut the bloody hell up, Potter!” snarled Malfoy, giving Harry a dirty look and looking back behind them.

“Can’t blame me for asking!”

“Yeah I can, actually! Like I said, it’s none of you damned business!”

“Can’t you stop for a minute?!”

“No.”

“I just want to talk for a minute.”

“No, you just want to stick your nose where it doesn’t belong. Now, if you’ll stop prying, stop annoying me and stop following me, I’m on my way to see Professor Snape.”

Harry paused and dropped back. “Fine.”

Malfoy looked over his shoulder, narrowing his eyes. “Mind you own business, Potter,” he said again, a warning tone in his voice.

As soon as Malfoy turned the next corner, Harry pulled out the Pendant and apparated to the tunnel side of the painting that led to Snape’s quarters. On one side, there were branches, thickly filed with the broad leaves of some lush forest tree.

Beyond the faint sound of falling water that the painting made, he heard a knock, and several seconds later the sound of a well oiled door opening. "Draco, come in," came Snape's deep voice.

"Godfather."

Harry pushed aside some leaves, searching for a gap he could see through into Snape's living room.

He paused when footsteps entered the room, then resumed searching, though he moved carefully, not wanting to make any noise which would alert Malfoy of his presence.

He finally found a comfortable position, leaning up against the side of the tunnel with his hand holding aside some leaves and making a tiny gap he could see through. Malfoy was seated on the lounge and behind him the curtains were open, providing a similar view to that from the Chamber.

As Harry watched, Snape entered the room holding two crystal wine glasses filled with a deep red wine. He handed one to Malfoy, who placed it on the table. Snape did the same and sat, steeping his fingers and surveying Malfoy intently. The Slytherin fidgeted, picking at a hem of his robe.

It was a while before Snape spoke. "How was your weekend?" he asked softly.

Malfoy shrugged. "Fine. Mother says hello."

Snape inclined his head, and there were a few more minutes of silence, during which Snape sipped his wine, still peering intently at Malfoy, who had not yet looked him in the eye.

"Did your father have anything planned for your weekend?"

"As if you don't know!" spat Malfoy, finally looking Snape dead in the eye.

"I can guess," replied Snape in a level tone, "But I do not know."

Malfoy snorted. "You know everything."

"You can talk to me, Draco,"

Malfoy gave a jerky nod of his head and a grunt before falling silent again.

Suddenly, the Slytherin darted a quick look towards the painting where Harry was and then exploded.

"Father took me to him, and it was- it was- he tortured me! He tortured me until my father was on his knees begging him to stop!"

"Our Lord is a harsh master," Snape murmured, a thin finger caressing his top lip.

Malfoy's breathing was slightly ragged. "But it was completely pointless! He was questioning my father's loyalty! Of course my father is loyal!"

Harry stared in horror at Malfoy.

"The Dark Lord must be sure of these things, Draco. He demands utmost loyalty. He tests us; you must be prepared for this. He knows your father's greatest weakness, and he used it to his advantage." Snape paused, and then continued, his tone careful. "It is an admirable quality to possess."

Malfoy's nostrils flared, but after a moment he nodded in agreement.

"Are you having doubts about joining the Dark Lord's ranks?" Snape stood and walked over to Malfoy, and as he watched, Snape drew back the sleeve of Malfoy's robe, giving a small nod of his head when he saw Malfoy's arm.

Malfoy hesitated before answering. "No," and shaking the robe back into place.

“Dammit!” whispered Harry, having been unable to see whether Malfoy’s arm remained unblemished.

“Good,” Snape replied to Malfoy. “We certainly don’t need one of our finest upcoming Death Eaters to defect to Dumbledore’s side.”

“I wouldn’t,” replied Malfoy defensively.

“Good. That man is a fool.” Snape paused, before adding, “He would give help to anyone who asked for it.”

“Hm.” Malfoy went back to fidgeting, throwing another glance at the painting. “He said he was looking forward to seeing me again.”

...

Malfoy got up to leave shortly after and Harry wandered along the tunnels and to the Chamber. He couldn’t believe that Malfoy had been tortured, and wondered how badly.

He was surprised when a moment later the Slytherin burst out of the tunnels behind him. “Potter. I knew I’d find you here! You don’t know what mind your own business means, do you?” yelled Malfoy, shoving Harry hard in the chest.

Harry scrambled to his feet, dodging another shove. “I told you I was going to speak to my godfather – that wasn’t an invitation to listen in on our conversation.”

“I wa-”

“Don’t lie! It’s exactly what you did and we both know it.”

“I was going to say - I wanted to know what happened to you over the weekend!”

“And I thought I already made it clear that it was none. Of. Your. Business!”

Harry narrowed his eyes and then lunged forward, reaching for Malfoy's arm. They grappled, Harry trying to wrench Malfoy's sleeve up so he could see his arm.

Malfoy tugged the arm away, and before Harry could block him, the Slytherin landed a punch across the side of his face.

...

When Harry regained consciousness, he sat up slowly, leaning on his elbows and looking blearily around the room.

"Your glasses are to your left," came Malfoy's voice, his tone bored.

Harry groped around on the floor.

"I said your left," droned Malfoy.

"Yeah, yeah," grunted Harry. He found his glasses and put them on, the world coming into clear focus.

The Slytherin was seated on the lounge with a book, his robe hung over the back of the lounge and the sleeves of his shirt pushed up to the elbows.

Harry scowled at the Slytherin, whose attention was focussed on whatever book he had. "You didn't have to knock me out, you know," Harry grumbled, picking himself up and seating himself on the lounge.

"I was simply defending myself." Malfoy indicated his jaw, which had a bruise forming. "And you ripped my robe in your completely undignified attack on my person."

"I didn't attack you."

"Well I don't know what you'd call it if not an attack. It was completely without reason as well, I might add. As you can see," Malfoy held out his arm, "I'm not marked."

Harry breathed in relief, though his voice was grim when he muttered, "How long is it going to stay that way?"

oOo

"You have forty five minutes to complete the test. I do not want to hear any talking and you may leave quietly when you are finished. Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy remain behind."

They were in potions, and Snape had set them a revision test so he knew what to go over in more detail before their exams. Harry wondered what Snape wanted with them.

He finished the test in forty minutes and spent the next five checking over his answers. By the time the class ended, only he, Malfoy, Seamus and Pansy were still in the room.

Snape called time and the four students shambled forward to deposit their tests on Snape's desk.

Snape waited until Seamus and Pansy had left the room before he spoke.

"We have a problem," he stated, and Harry exchanged a confused look with Malfoy. "I do not know what possessed you to choose each other as partners again. You had good reason in Defence, but there is no reason now. Choose new partners or work individually; the choice is up to you."

"But we already chose each other as partners!" argued Harry.

"And I said if I deemed any groups unsuitable that I would break them up!" hissed Snape. "Twenty points from Gryffindor for arguing with a teacher. Now get out."

oOo

As soon as Harry had finished with his Transfiguration homework, he rushed off to his computer, excitement coiling in his gut. His favourite fanfiction author, Neednotknowtheirname, had recently posted a new

story, and he had been looking forward to the new chapter with unrivalled anticipation. In fact, he had barely been able to concentrate on anything else all week. It seemed like an age before the computer finally booted up, and he clicked on the link in his favourites menu.

“Yes!” He danced a little jig; chapter three had been posted! Of course, as soon as he was finished reading, he would leave a review to thank said author for their hard work.

oOo

Hey guys, all my reviewers have been so great which is why I'm updating sooner than I thought. I'm thinking Harry's sixth year is going to wrap up fairly soon, so I have a question for everyone; should I start Harry's seventh year as a new story, or continue on this one? I actually have the storyline for that planned out! (Unlike I did when I started writing this). Let me know.

Also, three cheers for my three hundredth reviewer: Vanessa Riddle!

It's been hot as hell this week! 46 yesterday, 43 today. I'm meeelting...

Thanks to Chapter 30 reviewers: Emerald Eyes of Flame, nxkris, La Mariane, Kaeim, ams71080, Vanessa riddle, Chibeh, JonathLee, tazindy, draconicflare, fhippogriff, Jensindenial3516, SHuntress, swordbunny4486.

and

QuannanHade: Thank you, as usual. Hehe your reviews always make me laugh. The potion will have a minor part later on, but nothing important. And, thank you to Scamonda.

Erm... Title

“Why is he splitting us up?” complained Harry as they made their way up to the Great Hall.

“Why do you think, Potter?” muttered Malfoy darkly. “It was a ridiculous idea to partner up anyway. He’s right.”

“I don’t see what working on a Potions assignment together

“Because I’ll be seventeen in less than a month and at some stage soon after that... you know. If the wrong people were to find out we were working together amicably it wouldn’t be good for me. Someone might have already mentioned it to one of their parents.”

Harry scowled as they approached the Great Hall, and he wished his life was not so convoluted.

“You should wait here for a minute before you go out,” said Malfoy, stepping in front of him as they neared the corner.

Harry scowled. “Why me?”

“Because Slytherins and Gryffindors don’t casually chat on their way to lunch,” called Malfoy over his shoulder.

“I know that. I said why me?”

Malfoy smirked. “Because I’m hungry and I don’t want to wait.”

...

That afternoon after classes found Harry and Malfoy racing through the spray thrown up by the river in the canyon in pursuit of Malfoy’s practice Snitch. They had summoned their brooms from the courtyard outside the chamber and leaped off with wild abandon, plunging towards the water and releasing the Snitch on the way.



They twisted and turned as they raced up the canyon between the mountains which occluded most of the sunlight. Malfoy snagged the snitch and drew to a halt, holding it up in a victorious gesture.

"You're going down this weekend, Potter!" he called gleefully. "There's no way Gryffindor is holding onto the cup this year."

Harry grinned and yelled over the rushing water. "I wouldn't be so sure of that, Malfoy."

"Yeah? I've seen you Gryffs practicing. Good, but not good enough!"

...

Shortly after, they made their way back to the chamber, depositing their brooms in a corner by a bookshelf.

"What's this?" asked Malfoy, holding a piece of parchment that Harry recognised as the sheet he had written the list of numbers on to practice for Legilimency, and then thrown aside when he grew bored of the numbers.

"Ah... practicing for Legilimency."

"Severus told me about this method." Malfoy frowned slightly. "I never read about it in any books though."

Harry could see Malfoy's mind ticking over.

"What book did you get it out of?" asked the Slytherin.

"Erm... it might have been Legilimency for Beginners," replied Harry, recalling a title he had seen in a bookshop on one of their Hogsmeade weekends. "Speaking of Legilimency, can we have that lesson?"

Malfoy gave a resigned sigh and indicated the lounge, laying the parchment on the table and then sitting opposite Harry.

Harry performed the spell, and focussed his attention on finding Malfoy's first memory of boarding the Hogwarts Express. He recalled his first time on the Hogwarts Express, remembering the clack of the train tracks and the hum of the engine. A good deal of the memories whizzing around Harry dropped away, leaving very few to choose from.

Remembering the first time on the Hogwarts Express when Malfoy had entered his and Ron's carriage (it's true then, Harry Potter has come to Hogwarts), he found himself immersed in one image. He brought his hands up to his eyes and slowed it down. He was standing in a corridor of the train, and Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle were heading away from him, Malfoy peering into the compartments as he passed them. Finally, he stopped at one and opened the door. Harry came up behind them and looked over Goyle's shoulder, something he had never been able to do in real life where Goyle had always been taller than him. He saw his younger self sitting and scowling at Malfoy, who withdrew his hand. Ron was glaring heatedly at the Slytherin.

The memory came to an end and Harry found himself facing Malfoy on the lounge again.

"You know, Potter, I was deeply hurt by your rejection," said Malfoy, plastering a hurt look on his face and putting a hand over his heart.

Harry laughed. "Well, you were being a prat."

"I was being polite! I offered my hand in friendship and you knocked it back."

Harry rolled his eyes.

Malfoy was amused. "Where did you think of doing that to slow down the images?"

Harry smiled. "Remember the World Quidditch Cup? I found my pair of omnioculars in my trunk and decided to give it a go."

Malfoy chuckled. "Well, it certainly seems effective. Let's give it another go."

Harry delved into Malfoy's mind, Malfoy's laughter still echoing in his mind. In an instant, a group of memories were drawn towards Harry, laughter coming from each of them. Harry grinned and picked one at random, throwing himself into it.

Malfoy was laughing in victory, relief etched on his face. Harry turned, confused. There was nobody else in the room. He hadn't been there before, but judging from the stone walls and torches it seemed to be at Hogwarts. The room was large and cluttered with a myriad of debris, from broken quills to statues and paintings. The thing that held Malfoy's attentions was a large cupboard that looked vaguely familiar to Harry...

He was thrown from Malfoy's mind.

"That's enough for today, I think," said the Slytherin. "You've improved quite a bit. Next time we should try when I have some defences up."

Harry nodded. "What was that last memory? What were you so happy about?"

Malfoy waved the question aside. "Nothing important," he said evasively.

Harry shrugged, but he wondered why Malfoy was avoiding answering something that seemed entirely innocent. Another thing that itched in the back of his mind was the big cabinet. Where had he seen it before?

oOo

Harry was eating lunch on Monday when a disturbance erupted at the Slytherin Table on the other side of the Hall. There was a commotion near one end, and as he watched, screams began, getting louder and more frantic with each second, garnering the attention of everyone in the hall.

Someone fell backwards off their bench, scrambling to get away from some unseen foe. He was screaming unintelligibly, his eyes darting wildly about the student seated around him, but not seeing them. What he was seeing, Harry had no idea, but it was clearly terrifying the Slytherin, who he recognised now as Blaise Zabini.

Blaise rolled to his feet and backed away shakily. Harry wondered what was wrong with him when his gaze fell on Malfoy and he saw the blonde boy's small but satisfied smirk. Harry felt his heart clench and anger rising as he realised what Malfoy must have done.

Over at the Slytherin table, several of Blaise's friends had stood and were attempting to talk to him, but he was listening to nothing they said.

Nott approached him, darting forward and grabbing him by the front of his robes in an attempt to stop him from retreating any further. He gave the other boy a small shake. "What's wrong? Blaise?" The rest of the hall was silence, and even over at the Gryffindor Table, they could clearly hear what was being said.

Blaise finally spoke words that could be understood. "Stay away! Don't touch me!" he shrieked, his voice high. Blaise drew a knife from his pocket, and Harry thought it might be a butter knife from the table.

As the students watched, open mouthed and staring, Blaise plunged the butter knife deep into Nott's stomach and then jumped back, wailing terribly and staring with unfocussed eyes at Nott, who fell to his knees, staring in surprise as blood began to blossom like a flower on his shirt.

Malfoy, a stricken expression on his face jumped up and ran to him, catching him as he collapsed on the floor. Nott spluttered, gasping and holding his stomach tenderly, not quite touching the knife.

By now, the teachers had rushed to the Slytherin table and were attempting to calm Blaise down, but he was deaf to their words. He pulled his wand and levelled it at the nearest teacher, Snape.

“A-A.” Blaise gulped and backed himself into the wall, looking like a cornered animal as the teachers closed in on him, speaking words of comfort. Blaise took a strangled breath and steadied his wand. “A-Avada Ke-”

A stunner hit Blaise squarely in the chest, arcing from McGonagall’s wand and the Slytherin dropped like a stone, caught by Snape and Sprout before he hit the floor. Snape hefted the boy into his arms and after a brief word with Dumbledore and the other teachers, he, Madam Pomfrey and Nott, still supported by Malfoy, hurried out of the Great Hall.

Exclamations broke out all over the hall at the spell Blaise had been about to utter.

The teachers that remained made their way back to the Head Table and the Slytherin students who had been trying to calm Blaise down returned to their seats.

Up at the Head Table Dumbledore stood and commanded silence. “If anyone can shed some light on Mr. Zabini’s condition, I ask you please to approach a teacher. Now, I suggest you all finish your lunch, because it is almost time for you all to return to your classes.”

As Dumbledore swept a hand wide, indicating all the students, Harry caught sight of his hand, seeing to his horror that it was blackened and withered. He gasped, and squinted to see better, but Dumbledore’s hand returned to his side and his sleeve fell back over the hand.

After Dumbledore sat and conversation had resumed throughout the hall, Harry stood and headed up to the hospital wing, not really sure what he was going to do. He was unbelievably angry with Malfoy; he hadn’t imagined for a second that the Slytherin would use the potion, let alone on one of his friends.

As Harry approached the hospital wing, Malfoy emerged, a troubled look on his face.

Harry grabbed him roughly and pushed him down a small side corridor.

“What the hell did you think you were doing?” hissed Harry, his eyes blazing in anger as he held Malfoy against the wall. “You swore to me you wouldn’t use that potion on anyone.”

“I wasn’t intending to at the time,” spat Malfoy, struggling against Harry’s grip. “I didn’t know it would do that!”

“You nearly got two people killed!”

“Don’t you think I know that!?” roared Malfoy, shoving Harry away. “Do you think I want my friend and my godfather dead!?” he asked, his voice breaking.

Harry paused. He had never seen the Slytherin looking so unhinged, even when he had been talking with Snape after the weekend with Voldemort.

Harry stepped back, pursing his lips in frustration. “I can’t believe you’d be so stupid. You really didn’t want to hurt Blaise either, did you?”

Malfoy gave a small jerk of his head. “He’s been a right prat lately. I was just trying to teach him a lesson. I didn’t know the potion would be that potent.”

“We-”

“What have we here?”

Harry spun to see Snape standing several metres away at the end of the small corridor. “Nothing, sir.”

“Nothing, indeed.” Snape sneered and looked at Malfoy. “Draco, if you would like to see how Mr. Nott is doing, Madam Pomfrey has finished treating him.” He focussed his gaze on Harry. “Mr. Potter. I see no reason for you to be here.”

Snape watched them both pass him, flicking his gaze between the two of them and Harry felt Snape's eyes boring into him until he turned the corner as he made his way to the Common Room.

...

That night, Ron approached him in the Common Room. Harry looked up with an impassive expression. He missed Ron and Hermione; he couldn't deny it, but their betrayal had cut deeply and he wasn't sure if he could forgive them yet. The redhead sat down opposite him and handed across a thick and fancily decorated envelope.

"I'm supposed to give you this," muttered Ron, relinquishing it to Harry.

"What is it?"

"Wedding invitation. Bill and Fleur," grunted Ron. There was an awkward silence before Ron got up and wandered away.

Harry ripped open the envelope and pulled out the invitation, which was written on card instead of parchment. It was decorated with the same elegant pattern of the envelope and the words were written in neat calligraphy.

You are invited to the wedding of

William Weasley

and

Fleur Delacour

this coming July 21st at the Weasley residence.

Please send a return owl with your R.S.V.P.

At the bottom someone, presumably Bill, had scrawled a message. 'You'd better be there mate, or we're coming to get you!' Harry

grinned and stowed the invitation in his bag before scrawling a thanks and congratulations to the couple.

oOo

On Friday, Harry spent lunch in the chamber, becoming absorbed in the book he was reading.

Eventually he checked his watch and received a shock; he was about thirty seconds away from being late for Potions, and he had absolutely no chance of getting down to the dungeons in that amount of time. He seriously doubted whether Snape would be lenient.

Pulling the Pendant out, he apparated straight to the dungeons, with twenty seconds to spare.

Straightening his shirt, he was about to push open the door of the classroom when a shrill shriek sounded behind him. "Eek!"

Spinning, he saw Pansy Parkinson standing behind him, a hand to her mouth and her books clutched against her chest.

"Er... hey Pansy."

Harry ran a hand through his hair, wondering how on earth he was going to get out of this.

"Y-you-you..."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I what, Pansy?" Then he turned away to open the door.

"You can't apparate in Hogwarts!" she screeched. "It's in Hogwarts, A History!"

Harry couldn't help himself; he burst into laughter at Pansy's comment.

All of a sudden, the door was thrown open. "Potter. May I ask what is so amusing that is keeping you from my class?" Then his eyes fell on



Pansy. "Miss Parkinson? If you would be so kind as to attend my class, you are nearly late."

"But sir-"

"Yes, sir," Harry interrupted loudly, and made to step past Snape.

"But he apparated!" cried Pansy, her tone indignant.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Don't be ridiculous. You cannot apparate or disapparate within Hogwarts's bounds."

Harry's lips twitched.

"That's what I said, but he did sir. He appeared right there as I was walking up!"

Snape grabbed Harry by the neck of his robes and yanked him back into the corridor, closing the door behind them. "Well, Potter?" he asked delicately. "Is Miss Parkinson correct? Did you apparate?"

Harry attempted to look confused. "No, sir. You can't apparate inside Hogwarts. It says so in Hogwarts, A History."

Both Snape and Pansy narrowed their eyes at him, the quaver in his voice as he tried not to laugh evident. Snape turned to the Slytherin. "Miss Parkinson." Pansy looked at him, though he didn't speak. Instead, Pansy's eyes widened momentarily before Snape ushered her into the classroom.

"I thought you said you didn't use Legilimency on students?" said Harry.

"I believe I said it was not a favourite hobby of mine, however I will use it if I believe I am being lied to, especially if that lie endangers students of this school. You will wait in my office when the class is over, and then you are going to tell me how you did that."

...

Harry waited nervously and impatiently through the class. Snape kept shooting Harry suspicious and thoughtful glances throughout the entire lesson, putting Harry off his work, and in the end he ruined his potion.

When Snape let the class out, Harry wandered up the corridor to Snape's office. He only had to wait a few minutes before Snape came along and unlocked the door, leading Harry inside.

Snape sat behind the desk and Harry pulled out the chair in front of it.

"I don't believe I offered you a seat," said Snape quietly, his eyes focussed intently on Harry's.

"Oh... er... sorry." Harry pushed it back in and stood, fidgeting awkwardly. It had become habit for him to take the seat in front of Snape's desk when he came for Occlumency and Legilimency.

"Well?"

Harry averted his eyes and smoothed his face into a blank mask.  
"Well what, Professor?"

"Look at me. You know very well what. Tell me how you apparated into that corridor. It is supposed to be impossible."

"I didn't apparate at all. I don't even know how." It was true; they had had several lessons with an instructor from the Department for the Control and Regulation of Floos and Portkeys, but Harry had not managed it.

"And yet you achieved it today, Miss Parkinson clearly witnessed it."

"Then she's mistaken in what she saw, Professor. Perhaps the light in the corridor..."

"Do not take me for a fool, Mr. Potter," sneered Snape. "You do realise the danger it could pose to the school, its students and its staff if the knowledge were to find its way to Voldemort, do you not?"

“I didn’t apparate, I swear! I’ve no idea how, and even if I did figure out some way to do it, I’m not stupid to run about telling people about it.” Harry’s tone was sincere, and Snape appeared to relax slightly, though he was still clearly suspicious.

“I really do think Pansy just didn’t see me, Professor.”

“It is possible,” admitted Snape grudgingly. “If she simply did not see you because she was not concentrating, even if you were there then her memory would not show it either. That is why you must be careful when viewing another’s memories. They can know things, or you may not know things, which will influence your reaction to the memory.”

Harry felt relief; if Snape was turning this into a lesson, then he had mostly likely abandoned his accusation that Harry had apparated. Snape eyed him intently for a few more moments before indicating the door. “I am not sure I believe you, Potter. I will be keeping my eye on you.”

“Yes sir,” replied Harry as he went to the door.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid!” he muttered to himself as he sped up the corridor and out of the dungeons. He shouldn’t have been so careless. Detention was better than losing the Pendant and Snape was right. If it got to Voldemort that apparition within Hogwarts was possible and Harry was captured, then it would endanger a lot of people.

Resolving not to be so careless in the future, he patted the Pendant and made his way up to the Common Room on foot.

oOo

That weekend, they had their last Hogsmeade trip of the year. Harry strolled through the main street with Seamus, Dean and Neville. The weather was fine and they took their time, going into any shop that took their fancy.

They were passing the shop where he and Malfoy had twice sold the basilisk parts (which were long sold out) when a display in the

window caught his eye. He waved the other three along. "I'll catch up with you."

The three nodded and continued on their way and Harry slipped into the shop. Stacked behind the window were different kinds of potions equipment.

What had caught his eye were crystal vials, held in a black tone stand with matching crystal and stone stoppers. The vials caught the light, sparkling with the colours of the rainbow. They were expensive, but he had enough money left over from the last lot of basilisk parts they had sold.

He took a boxed set up to the counter and paid for them, then made his way out into the main street to catch up with Seamus, Dean and Neville.

oOo

The next Saturday morning dawned bright and early, with conditions that were perfect for Quidditch. Harry was looking forward to the match against Slytherin; it was the last one, and whoever won would win the cup. Gryffindor was playing well and he was feeling confident.

He shovelled down a filling breakfast and then herded his team to the changing rooms.

He wasn't one for speeches like Oliver had been, but he felt something was in order for such an important game.

"Alright guys, this is it. Last game of the season and if we win it we keep the Cup, so let's give it everything we've got. You've all been playing excellently, and I think we've definitely got a fighting chance."

He looked around proudly at the team, some of whom he had trained. They were all flushed; with excitement, anticipation and nervousness. "Let's get out there."

The team gave a cheer and they all grabbed their brooms, walking out onto the field to cheers from three quarters of the school.

“Now I want a good, fair game,” said Madam Hooch as the two captains faced each other and shook hands grimly. In past years the Slytherin team especially had been quite rough, but since Malfoy had taken over the captaincy from Marcus Flint, there was much less of a need for the warning.

“Good Luck,” she finished, and blew the whistle. Harry’s eyes followed the Snitch as everyone rose into the air, but it disappeared behind the mass of red, gold, green and silver that was massing in the air.

The game began in a rush of colour, with Katie grabbing the quaffle straight away and passing to Ginny, who shot off up the field in an attempt to score before the Slytherin Keeper had settled himself in a defensive position. She succeeded, and the stadium rang out with cheers as Gryffindor scored the first goal only seconds into the game.

Harry let his broom take him high as he gazed around the field, keeping one eye out for the Snitch and the other open for bludgers.

Ten minutes into the game, each team had scored only one more goal each. Bellamy was as good a keeper as Ron was, and neither were letting the quaffle past. Harry was having difficulty finding the Snitch; the Slytherin’s tactic seemed to be to keep him occupied dodging bludgers, and it was working; he had spent half his time making quick turns and rolls on his broom to avoid the heavy black balls that were belted at him by Crabbe and Goyle who were, if nothing else, quite strong.

He heard a cheer and looked to see who had scored; it was Gryffindor. He turned back to look for the Snitch and a bludger narrowly missed his head, so close that he felt it brush his hair. There was a long, low ‘Ooooooh’ from the crowd.

The sun which before had been pleasantly warm, was now getting hotter and brighter, glinting off of cameras and jewellery in the crowd and distracting Harry’s search for the tiny golden ball that would win the game. He could see that Malfoy was having trouble too, squinting in the bright light.

Another roar went up from the crowd, this time from the Slytherins as Montague got past Ron's defences and put the quaffle through the right hand hoop.

Harry ducked yet another bludger and swerved away to the opposite end of the pitch, scanning for the elusive Snitch.

He had still not spotted it a half hour later. By now he was sweating, his hands slick on the broom handle and droplets running down from his forehead. The score was looking good though; 120 versus 50 in Gryffindor's favour.

All of a sudden, Harry saw a glint, right in the middle of the field. He went into a steep dive almost by instinct, gaining speed as he dropped towards the speck that might be the Snitch.

Malfoy had seen it too, and was racing towards it from across the field, not quite as high as Harry but further across the field.

He got close enough to see that it was the snitch and not an illusion, and urged his broom on harder.

Both he and the Slytherin seeker were converging on the Snitch when it suddenly darted away like prey sensing a predator.

Harry made a tight turn, moving nearly parallel to the field now.

Malfoy pulled up alongside him, and each of them struggled to get ahead, yo-yoing back and forth with one in the lead and then the other.

The crowd was on its feet, urging the two seekers onwards, but Harry didn't hear them. His whole focus was on catching the tiny ball that was speeding ahead of him and the wind was rushing loudly in his ears.

He and Malfoy turned and zig-zagged in tandem, following the path the Snitch made and slowly gaining on it.

They were so close now, both with arms extended and scrabbling for the snitch when suddenly his broom jerked, the front end spinning so far that he nearly went a full circle. He realised with a rush of disappointment that a bludger had collided with the tail end of his broom, causing it to swing wildly away. In the next second a loud and exuberant cheer went up, and Harry could tell it was the Slytherins. He turned his broom and saw the Snitch clasped in Malfoy's hand, held high as the Slytherin team descended to congratulate him.

A morose groan went up from the Gryffindor section of the crowd and Harry hung his head in defeat. He had been so close.

The team retreated quickly to the changing room, away from the victorious cheers issuing forth from the Slytherins, who were streaming out onto the field.

He earned a few commiserating slaps on the back from team members as they all slouched off to the showers.

"It was close, mate."

Harry turned at the sound of the hesitant voice and saw Ron heading for the showers. He nodded, "Yeah. It was."

Ron nodded back and turned away.

"Hey. Ron?"

Ron looked back hopefully. "You played well today. The chasers had no chance."

Ron grinned and walked away, and Harry went back out to the pitch.

He waited until the stands had cleared out before taking to the air again. He was disappointed with their loss, but not overly so. They had played well and in the end, it was purely bad luck that they hadn't won. He did a few relaxing laps of the pitch before he headed to the changing rooms, which had emptied out by now. He showered and changed quickly and headed back up to the castle with his broom.

He took one last look at the Quidditch pitch before exiting the stadium and heading up the hill.

“Told you we would win,” said a bragging voice behind him and Harry turned and saw Malfoy walking towards him, smirking superiorly.

Harry smiled and shook his head. “Congratulations, Draco,” he said sincerely, offering his hand.

Malfoy looked at it blankly for a second, and then looked Harry in the eye, grasping his hand tightly. He nodded once. “Harry.”

oOo

Hey guys, sorry about the wait in getting this one out. My imagination decided to go walkabout, and I was just really stuck for what to write. I shall try my best to get the next one out much quicker.

Someone asked for longer chapters. I'll try, but I'm not guaranteeing anything. It's a toss up between longer chapters and longer update times.

So far, most people have been saying that I should continue with one story instead of starting a new one for Harry's seventh year, so I think that's what I'll do. That's good for me actually, because I have no idea what I'd call a new story. ;)

oOo

Thanks to reviewers: fhippogriff, nxkris, swordbunny4486, Emerald Eyes of Flame, AnnF, auswiz, La Mariane, vanessa riddle, Hieadge, RockIII, ams71080, JonathLee, name, Kris, Anne399, Queen Victoria, Jensindenial3516, zarkan

and

QuannanHade: Sorry, this one wasn't quite as snappy as usual, so hopefully you didn't get too bored hehe. Thanks for the great reviews : )



## Birthdays and Betrayals

Over the next few weeks, Harry made a bit more progress with his Animagus transformation.

In their last practice session, he had completely burst out of his clothes, resulting in Malfoy being reduced to tears of laughter as Harry returned to his normal size and hid himself behind a cushion, blushing furiously. Malfoy himself had grown a great deal as well, though he had succeeded in incorporating his clothing into the change.

They had been working at it for months now, and though he had known it wasn't easy, Harry desperately wanted to know what he was. He was growing more and more impatient to complete the change.

When he transformed now, he was incredibly lanky, and he still had those ridiculous little arms that were melded with his body nearly all the way down to his wrists. His skin was taking on a much more greenish tinge, and became much rougher. According to Malfoy, he could no longer talk properly, though he could understand himself perfectly fine. His feet were much larger, his nails sharp and pointed and black. His legs had grown, though not in proportion with his body.

Malfoy now had a nice tail growing, topped with the same white spikes that ran down the middle of his head and neck. His face was distinctly reptilian, though his mouth had yet to completely transform. Protrusions in Malfoy's back indicated where wings would appear from. In addition to that, like Harry, he now transformed into an even bigger creature and they had taken to using the large empty room off to the side of the library, which earlier in the year they had used as a place to practice duelling.

He had made progress in Legilimency too; he could now draw in memories much more easily and slow them down, so that it was much easier to discern which was the one that was most likely to give him the information he was seeking.

As he had improved, he had noticed a slight but definite decrease in the number of visions he had, a fact which buoyed his enthusiasm for Legilimency a great deal. It seemed to sicken Snape when Harry turned up for lessons with a smile on his face.

oOo

Malfoy's birthday passed. Harry was a little unsure as to how Malfoy would react about the vials he'd bought for him, but he saw it as a way of cementing whatever sort of relationship it was that they had.

Malfoy was seventeen now, and he had said that that was the age he would be marked. Harry wasn't sure he could sway Malfoy from the path that seemed set out for the Slytherin, but he was sure that the way to do it was to simply continue on befriending him, because to straight out tell Malfoy it was wrong only caused him to get angry.

He hadn't thought Malfoy would appreciate bows and ribbons, so he had left the box unwrapped and as it was, simply writing Draco across the top. Crystal was expensive, and he had only been able to afford a two vial set, but he thought the Slytherin would appreciate the gift.

Harry had watched the next morning as a tawny owl carried the box to the Slytherin table and the Slytherin untied it, reading his name across the top. He obviously recognised the handwriting, because his eyes flickered briefly along the Gryffindor Table, though he did not see Harry.

Malfoy opened the box and Harry felt satisfaction when his face lit up for an instant.

...

They were assigned to do research for their end of term project in Potions, and Harry found to his annoyance that he had forgotten his text book.

"Sir, may I go and get my textbook please?"

Snape looked up with roll of his eyes. "No you may not, Potter. Ten points for not coming to class prepared."

Harry scowled. "How am I sup-"

"Go to the cupboard and get a spare copy from there."

Harry jumped up and went to the storage cupboard, looking around amongst the potions ingredients for the spare books. They were stacked on a bottom shelf and Harry went to the sixth year ones.

The top few were all covered with some mysterious goo and, not wanting to make skin contact with it, he pulled out the book right at the bottom and carried it back to his seat.

He could have chosen a better book, he thought as he flipped through to a page which gave basic descriptions of what effect certain ingredients had on potions. The book had clearly belonged to someone once; it was covered in the person's messy scrawl, around the edges and in between the lines.

However, not wanting to annoy Snape by going back for another book, he simply tried to ignore it and continued with his research.

Finally the lesson came to an end. They packed up and Malfoy pushed past him on the way out of the classroom.

"Chamber tonight," he muttered towards Harry, before walking off down the corridor with Theodore Nott.

...

They were seated in the lounge that night, Draco reading and Harry talking quietly with Salazar.

The Slytherin had said nothing about the vials, as Harry had suspected he wouldn't.

"What are you reading?" asked Harry lazily, watching Salz curl up his arm and then down the other.

"It's my favourite book. It's an epic, about this wizard named Scorpius. He's an adventurer, and he spends his days sailing the seas, going from distant land to distant land conquering mighty beasts and searching for great treasures. Severus got me an original copy as a gift. It's in very fine condition."

"Sounds great," he replied dryly and Malfoy shot him an annoyed look.

"It's a classic, Potter. Unfortunately, you have no class, so I doubt you'd be able to appreciate it."

Harry rolled his eyes and stood. "I'm going to go and feed Salz."

Malfoy shuddered, but didn't reply, and Harry walked into the tunnels with Salz before apparating to a dark corner of the dungeons where he had found that the mice were plentiful. It didn't take the snake long to catch a mouse, and Harry quickly made his way back to the warmth of the library.

Back in the chamber, he placed Salazar on the window so he could warm himself after the chill of the dungeons.

Harry cocked his head to the side, looking at a large cage that was sitting near the window, sure it had not been there when he had left. Harry jerked his chin towards it. "Where'd that come from?"

Malfoy shrugged and Harry raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Well what's it for, then?"

To Harry's amusement and surprise, a pink tinge appeared over Malfoy's face and he mumbled something that Harry didn't understand. He didn't bother looking up from his book.

Harry sat up, suddenly immensely curious about the cage. He got up to inspect it. A water bowl sat at one end, and a bowl of some kind of dried food next to it. There was a rug at the other end, and an assortment of toys scattered about; a squeaky bone shaped thing, a tunnel, and a box with holes.

“Did you get a pet for your birthday?” he asked, wondering why the Slytherin could possibly be embarrassed about that.

Malfoy shifted uncomfortable and ignored Harry.

Suddenly, a tiny head popped out of Malfoy’s collar. The animal had a small pointed face with a little pink nose and black nose, beige fur fluffing around its face.

“Is that-” Harry choked on a laugh. “Is that a ferret?”

“Stop laughing Potter!” yelled Malfoy indignantly, desperately but carefully tucking the small animal back under his collar.

Harry struggled to control the laughter that wanted to explode out of him, and he managed to be mostly successful, though he continued to let out the odd chortle as he spoke.

“I didn’t buy him, alright? He was a gift. Believe me, if it was my choice I’d never see the bloody thing again.”

“If you don’t like him, why don’t you give it away? I’ll bet there’s a hundred girls here who would willingly take it off your hands.”

“I can’t do that! He was a gift from my mother! And stop calling him ‘it;’ his name is Gaspard.”

Harry couldn’t help but notice that Malfoy seemed to have a lilt of affection in his voice as he spoke.

“Well that’s a nice name. Did he come with it, or did you choose it?” asked Harry, lacing his words with put on niceness and curiosity.

Malfoy bristled at his tone, his face turning even redder.

“Shut it, Potter.”

“Why would your mother get you a ferret? Doesn’t she know what happened with M-”

“Don’t! Say it,” growled Malfoy. And yes, my mother does know about that. Several years on, and she now seems to think there was a funny side to it,” grumbled Malfoy, sneering at his mother’s sense of humour.

Suddenly Malfoy lunged forward, snapping his book shut. “Not a word to anybody, Potter. I’ll be the laughing stock of the school if people know I have something so... so-”

“Cute?” supplied Harry. “Adorable, lovable?”

Malfoy sneered. “Whatever, as a pet. So you’d better not tell anyone!”

Harry held up his hands in mock defeat, smirking. “I have to go. I’ve got detention with Snape.”

“And make sure your snake doesn’t get him!” snapped Malfoy as he turned away.

Harry smirked. “Will do.”

“I don’t want to have to write my mother and tell her Gaspard got eaten alive by a snake!”

“I’m sure she’d be terribly upset.”

A cushion hit Harry hard in the back of the head.

oOo

“You now seem to be able – usually – to access memories when I have my barriers completely lowered. There is much room for improvement, however I do not think you will get any better until we up the difficulty level. So, I will have my shields in place, very slightly, so that there is a little more resistance. Remember, we also want you to be able to call memories to you more easily, so continue with the exercises I set you.”

“Yes, sir,” agreed Harry amicably, still laughing in his mind about Gaspard.

“What is wrong with you?” snapped Snape. “You’ve had that infuriating little smile on your face since you got here. And please, if you were canoodling with some little girlfriend before you came here, I don’t want to hear it,” sneered Snape, the expression on his face one of disgust at the thought.

Harry cleared his mind, making a point to shove Malfoy and Gaspard to the very back of his mind.

“Nothing like that sir. Sorry, I’m ready now.”

“Very well.

Harry pointed his wand and incanted. “Legilimens.” He felt the familiar sensation of falling forward into Snape’s mind, but this time he recognised the resistance. He still managed it, but it required more concentration than usual.

Like usual, he was standing on a sort of floor, but this time there was something different. Frowning, he took a step forward and his foot slipped out from under him. He was brought painfully to one knee, before toppling sideways completely. “Ouch,” he grumbled, trying to get to his feet again. The floor was extremely slippery, seeming to have a light film across it. He carefully stood,

As he called the memories to him however, it seemed not that they came to him, but that he moved to them, and in doing so, the slippery floor unbalanced him and he could not hold his concentration on drawing them in.

After a good while of struggling to do that and falling hard to his knees several times, he finally stayed down and crossed his legs, finding a comfortable position on the slick surface. This time when he called the memories to him, he seemed not to move quite so much, though his body seemed to sway slightly as the memories moved closer.

Now that he could more effectively draw the memories towards him, he found also that it was like pulling a balloon through water, instead

of through the air like it usually felt. The closer the memories got, the harder it was to draw them in. Several times, he lost his concentration and the memories floated away again, as if they were being pulled towards the surface of the water.

After what seemed like an age, and without much success on Harry's part, Snape expelled him from his mind.

He looked up at the clock, surprised to find he had been there over two hours. He rubbed at his aching head and saw Snape copy the motion. The Potions Master took two vials from his drawer, swallowing the contents of one and handing the other to Harry.

"Not a bad effort," commented Snape, surprising Harry. The man rarely offered compliments, and when he did it was even rarer that there was not a stinging remark to follow.

"It was hard," mumbled Harry in reply.

Snape nodded tiredly. "As always, all it takes is practice. It takes a while to get used to a unique shield that are a concept created in an individual's mind. I assure you, it will get much harder than that, too."

Harry nodded wearily and got to his feet, slipping the vial into his pocket.

"Don't forget to clear your mind before you sleep," came Snape's voice behind him as he closed the door behind him.

Out in the corridor, he pulled his robes up and inspected his knees, and was surprised to find that they were not bruised, though they did still ache, and he supposed that was because it was all just in his mind. His physical body had remained quite still during the whole lesson.

Harry trudged back to Gryffindor Tower yawning. His head was pounding from the Legilimency lesson and he gratefully downed the vial of pain relief potion Snape had provided him with. It was nice of him really, thought Harry as he fell asleep. Snape had never bothered the first time Harry had been learning Occlumency.



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Snape was handing Harry a vial of the head ache relief potion, though strangely enough it was a different colour, and Harry wondered how he knew it was that potion at all. He supposed it was because he trusted Snape. Yes, Snape was a very loyal man...

Harry pulled out the stopper and swallowed the content of the vial. All of a sudden, instead of the potion dulling the ache in his head, the pain grew and grew and grew, and he stared at Snape with a dawning horror.

"You poisoned me! You – you lied to me! I trusted you!" yelled Harry, the pain in his head becoming so great that he felt it would soon split in half, if it hadn't already.

Harry stormed towards Snape, rage building inside him. "I thought you were loyal to me!"

Snape sunk to his knees before him. "My Lord, I swear I am wholly faithful to you."

At that moment, Harry found they were in a moonlit scene, with Dark figures circled around them. He looked down on the Potion's Master with renewed rage.

"Would you swear on your life, Severus?"

"Yes, my Lord," replied Snape, his voice adamant and his face impassive.

"Then you clearly do not value your life." He paused, pacing slowly as he gazed down at the man he had trusted for so long.

"Well do I recall the great services you have done me over the years, even when you were young and unsure in the times before I was ripped from my body. Then, perhaps, I had reason to see you as weak, but since my return you have showed no hesitancy or will to disobey me and yet, I simply do not see that it could be anyone else

who has done so with such great... dedication and... much as I hate to admit it, success. Yes, Severus, you have caused me great pains.

A thin finger reached out and lifted Snape's chin, and all at once Harry was plunged into the Potion's Master's mind. He was moving much faster than usual, gathering memories and then tossing them aside, first with impatience and then with growing fury and strangely enough, a tinge of respect and amusement. He withdrew from the man's mind and looking down with a cruel smirk, he murmured, "You are... a superb Occlumens, Severus. Better even than the fool Dumbledore."

"My Lord, I swear, I am hiding nothing from you," breathed Snape, an almost unnoticeable edge of desperation and resignation creeping into his voice.

He paused as if considering the Potion Master's words. "Truly, I could find nothing incriminating in your mind, but..." Voldemort paused and tapped his chin. "Perhaps you have fooled yourself, Severus, been caught in your own trap."

"I don't understand, My Lord. I swear-"

"No one is as faithful as your mind tells me you are, Severus. Except perhaps dear Bellatrix." He inclined his head towards a hooded figure in the circle, one smaller than the rest. "The others in this circle have reason to be loyal; Lucius," he extended his hand toward a figure to his left, "Has his family, for whom he would do anything. Septimus and Yaxley have their positions, for which they will be eternally grateful to me. Rabastan, Rodolphus and Dolohov have shown their loyalty through a decade in Azkaban."

Voldemort paused, considering his next words. "Yet when I consider you, Severus, I see no reason why you are loyal to me. I see you, the only half-blood in the Inner Circle, one of the most intelligent men I have ever met, and I must question why you pledge your loyalty to me. I know perhaps the reasons you had when first you came to me as nothing more than a boy. But now..."

Again he paused, his eyes staring straight into Snape's as if he were trying desperately to see everything in the Potion Master's mind.

"The more I thought on it, the more I began to suspect that you have been walking a different path to the one you led me to believe, a path you long ago began to tread. Again and again I have waved aside actions you have taken as something other than deceit. How you aided in thwarting me when I possessed Quirrell's body, how you saved the life of Harry Potter when Quirrell tried to unseat him from his broom. Well to I recall how you begged me to spare the life of that mudblood. You were only too happy to watch her husband and child burn, but her... her you wished spared. And now you are protecting her son."

He said the last sentence with conviction, disgusted pitying conviction. His pale, spidery hand grasped Snape's jaw, holding it in a cold hard grip. "Am I right, Severus?" he hissed, the fury building again. "Do I speak the truth?"

"No! No, my Lord!"

"Silence!" he screamed, and Snape was thrown backwards, a sickening crack splitting the air as he threw his arm out to cushion the blow as he hit the ground hard.

"Perhaps I need to persuade you to reveal your secrets to me, Severus..."

He withdrew his wand, caressing the yew with his long fingers.

Slowly, he pointed his wand at the man on the ground. Before he could incant, however, Snape had whipped his wand out and cursed him, sending him spinning to the ground with a gash in his side.

Around him, cries rang out and Snape's wand was flung from his hand as a half a dozen spells hit him simultaneously.

"You dare to draw your wand on me!?" he screeched, angered beyond measure that the man's quick reflexes had bettered him. Not again.

“Yes, that spell was a specialty of yours wasn’t it, Severus? Let me show you a specialty of mine.”

He levelled his wand once again. “Crucio.”

For two whole minutes the man before him remained stoic, a mere grimace marring his face, which stared hatefully back. Soon however, the pain became too much and the betrayer’s screams filled the air.

\*\*\*

Harry darted awake, his breathing heavy and a blinding ache in his scar. He groaned loudly and rolled out of bed, banging his knees and grazing them on the stone floor. He pushed through the pain and pushed to his feet, pulling open his bedside drawer and removing the half empty potions vial that contained the pain relief potion that Snape provided him when he had severe visions.”

What little was left in the vial cleared his head enough to think more clearly, and he staggered to his trunk and threw open the lid, yanking his invisibility cloak over his shoulders. He had to do something, had to save Snape from the fate he was most certainly facing at this very moment.

Harry pocketed his wand and headed for the common room and out through the portrait hole, where he hovered uncertainly.

He considered Dumbledore, but anyone could tell the headmaster had been unusually weak the past few days. He wouldn’t risk Ron and Hermione by dragging them along, and even if he did, what could they do? He could go to Tonks, but she would just go to Dumbledore, and the Order would take too long to rally.

He needed someone who would act immediately, who would be willing to risk it for Snape.

Setting his shoulders in grim determination, he apparated to the only person he could think of who seemed to give a damn about the Potion’s Master.

The room was dark, silvery moonlight slanting through the windows and illuminating a strip of floor and the corner of a chair. The rest of the room was cloaked in darkness until Harry pulled out his wand. "Lumos!" he yelled, not bothering to be quiet.

The light and his shout had the effect of waking the sleeping occupant of the room who struggled, tangled in his blankets for a moment and fending off the glare of light with his hand.

"Potter! What the bloody hell!?" yelled Malfoy when Harry shook the cloak of his head.

"Get up, quick!

"It's the middle of the bloody night! What are doing in m-"

"Snape's being tortured!"

Malfoy sprung up instantly, all traces of sleep gone.

"What do you mean, tortured?"

"Voldemort has him. He's going to kill him. We have to help!"

"Why? Why would he do that? How can you know that?" gasped Malfoy, stumbling over his words as panic began to war with disbelief on the Slytherin's face.

"Snape was a spy for the Order, and Voldemort knows!"

Malfoy froze for a second and then shook his head. "What?" he asked distractedly. "N-no.. no!"

"Yes! Now are you going to help me or not, Draco. What's more important to you? Snape, or Voldemort?"

Malfoy hesitated for a second, before saying in a shaky voice, "We need to get help? How can we... who do we-"

“He could be dead by the time we do that!” yelled Harry frantically, grabbing the Slytherin’s shoulder. “I have a better, well, faster plan.”

Harry threw the invisibility cloak over them both and then drew the chain of Slytherin’s Pendant around Malfoy’s neck. “We can apparate directly using this pendant. All you need to do is think of the place you want to be, and it’ll take us there.” Harry didn’t bother saying that Malfoy probably wouldn’t be conscious at the other end of the journey, and he hoped against hope that it wouldn’t drain both of them.

Malfoy’s eyes widened, but he didn’t question what Harry was saying. “You need to apparate us directly to where Snape is, and I mean right next to him. When we get there, I’ll throw the chain around his neck as well and apparate us all back here.”

“Look!” Harry locked his eyes with Draco’s, and found the Slytherin’s presence delve into his mind. He pushed what he had witnessed to the fore of his mind, and then Draco’s presence was gone. The blond was paler than usual and shaking slightly but he nodded, and in the next instant, Harry found his eyes adjusting to a different light. He looked around, dazed. The Pendant had definitely taken it out of him, but not as much as it had Malfoy, who was slumped against him unconscious. Thankfully, Malfoy had made his thought clear and Snape was right beside them, a guttural moan issuing from his throat and blood flecking his lips as he breathed sharply in and out. Harry paled at the sight of Snape’s body, beaten and broken and oozing blood from a dozen visible wounds.

All this Harry took in in the brief moment before his scar flared to life as it recognised Voldemort’s close presence.

Struggling not to pass out, he slipped an arm around Malfoy and pulled them both closer to Snape, hoping the cloak continued to cover them for as long as possible. He grunted as he lugged Malfoy’s dead weight, knowing that if he wasn’t careful three people could die tonight.

Before his eyes, another curse hit Snape and a harsh scream erupted from him, trailing off into a bloody gurgle as blood bubbled from his mouth.

Desperate not to witness this further, Harry pulled Malfoy and lunged forward to Snape, pulling at the chain with his free hand. He felt the cloak slip down to his shoulders, catching on Malfoy's head.

He heard a roar of outrage as he slipped the chain around Snape's head, feeling it cutting into his own neck as it was pulled tight.

A sharp pain shot through his arm like a hot sword and then they were gone, the chaos of the clearing replaced with a blissful, but deathly silence. Harry registered ragged breathing before he passed out, knowing that even if he hadn't reached his intended destination he had at least gotten Snape out.

oOo

I'm having a bit of trouble writing lately, for some reason. I'm not happy with a lot of this chapter, but if I didn't just post it, I would have spent ages trying to make it better, and probably not have gotten anywhere anyway. So, I'll probably come back when I do think of what this chapter needs.

You should be proud of me though; I actually have a title for this chapter, which is an improvement on the last few.

Please review (they're very inspiring). Most reviews for a chapter is 28. Maybe we can break the record??? I'm very hopefully awaiting your reviews... : )

Thanks, thanks, thanks to:

Anne399, Vanessa riddle, La Mariane, fhippogriff, invisivel, name, nxkris, justanotherfan756, Emerald Eyes of Flame, draconicflare, ladysavay, PhoenixFlight72, ams71080

and

QuannanHade: I remember when I was in Yr 11... seems like not long ago, but 4 years... wow. Time flies. Thanks for reviewing, as usual : )

Blah: A great review, thank you. I have taken it on board and I appreciate your comments. I do definitely need to think about the story a bit more, but I think I'll leave that until after I've finished it, or I'd always be planning and never writing. Plus, I'd have no one to point out my mistakes and make suggestions like this lol. Thanks for reviewing : )



## Somewhere Safe

Harry woke up to the familiar sight of the Hogwarts Infirmary and gave a sigh of relief. He had managed to apparate the three of them to safety after all.

Seeing he was awake, the Matron bustled over with a friendly smile.

"Is Snape alright?" he asked quickly before she could speak, propping himself up on his elbows. "They were torturing him!"

Madam Pomfrey gave an anxious cluck of her tongue. "Not well at all, I'm afraid. Nothing for you to worry about though dear." She patted his shoulder reassuringly. "You're free to go now that you've woken up. It doesn't appear you were injured in any way."

"No, I wasn't. I'm fine. What about Draco?" He paused. "Malfoy, is he alright?"

"Oh yes, he left the day before yesterday. He seemed quite out of sorts about something, very tetchy, but otherwise he was fine. The Headmaster has asked me to inform him when the two of you awoke, so I imagine he will be here quite soon to have a word with you."

Harry gave a resigned sigh. He had no idea what he was going to say. He was frustrated that the Pendant had been taken, but he supposed there was nothing really he could have done about it.

No sooner had Madam Pomfrey finished talking, then Dumbledore swept into the hospital wing, a twinkle lighting in his eye as he laid eyes on Harry.

"Harry, my boy, it is excellent to see you up and about." Dumbledore conjured an armchair next to Harry's bed and popped a yellow lemon drop into his mouth. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, sir. A bit tired, but that's all really," replied Harry honestly.

“Good, good.” Dumbledore’s expression became more serious. “I’m afraid I am at somewhat of a loss as to what has happened. Mr. Malfoy seems not to remember all that much, aside from the fact that you came to him for help. After that we know nothing of the events which transpired until you were found at Privet Drive.”

“I don’t –wait, what?!”

“Yes, it seems the three of you arrived with quite a bang, crowded into the cupboard under the stairs.”

Dumbledore gave a humourous smile. “I imagine it was quite a surprise for your relatives.”

Harry almost smiled. He could certainly imagine.

“I admit, it was a great surprise to me. I was alerted by the wards that something of a magical nature had occurred at your home, but I had no idea what. I hastened there at once to find your frantic relatives...” Dumbledore paused before continuing. “Deciding how best to pull you all out of the cupboard.”

Harry snorted. He seriously doubted the Dursley’s would have even touched them. What struck him was the fact that they had arrived there. He tried, but could not remember what he had been thinking when he apparated them away. It had been his plan to apparate to Hogwarts, to the hospital wing, but perhaps he hadn’t actually thought that in the stress of the moment.

The fact was, he remembered nothing after apparating there.

Dumbledore seemed to recognise the look of confusion on Harry’s face, for he said, “I take it then that you are not sure how it is you came to be there?”

Harry shook his head. “No sir, I really don’t remember all that much.”

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. “Perhaps you remember how it is you came to know Professor Snape was in trouble, and how you subsequently got to him?”

Harry thought carefully before answering. "I had a vision. I saw him being tortured."

"I understand, of course. What part did Mr. Malfoy have in all of this?"

Dumbledore appeared extremely curious, and once again Harry chose his words carefully.

"He apparated us there. We grabbed Snape and then I apparated us back."

Dumbledore frowned. "Why did you not come to me, or Nymphadora? Why Mr. Malfoy?"

He was the first person I ran into, and I knew... I knew he would want to help Snape."

Dumbledore gave a weary sigh. "That is certainly true."

There were a few moments of silence before the headmaster spoke again. "In future my boy, you must not rush into these things. Placing trust in young Mr. Malfoy may have seemed like the right thing to do at the time, but you have people you can truly trust who are more than willing to help you."

Harry nodded. "I know."

"I am confused about one thing, however." Harry checked his mental shields as Dumbledore slipped his hand into a deep pocket of his robe and removed the Pendant of Slytherin, holding it by the chain and dangling it in front of Harry. "This," he said, indicating the Pendant, "is a truly remarkable piece. Might I enquire as to its origins, and what it was doing about your three necks when you were found?"

Harry swallowed. He had no answer that would really be an answer. He couldn't tell Dumbledore what the Pendant did. So he lied.

"I really don't remember anything much that happened, Professor. The chain – I bought that in Diagon Alley last holidays for a galleon."

Harry shrugged. "It looked interesting. But I have no idea why it would have been around all our necks. Maybe it just slipped round?"

Dumbledore peered carefully at Harry, and Harry kept his shields strong, though he did not feel Dumbledore probing at his mind. After a while Dumbledore spoke, looking at the Pendant. "I believe there is something of a mystery here, something to do with this magnificent pendant. I'm afraid I will have to keep it for the moment."

Harry sat up indignantly. "Why? I paid for it, it's mine! You can't just take it!"

Dumbledore gazed seriously at him. "You should not have been able to apparate to Privet Drive, Harry. Nothing was found on you but your wand and this pendant. If indeed it had something to do with your ability to cross the wards, then I am afraid I must study it and find its secrets, so that we can guard against anyone who may have the knowledge embedded in the magic of the pendant."

Harry glared at Dumbledore, though the old man seemed not to notice. "There's nothing dangerous about the Pendant, Professor!"

"That remains to be seen, my boy. Now, Madam Pomfrey tells me you are free to leave, and I'm sure you don't want to be in here any longer than is necessary."

Harry pursed his lips, annoyed at Dumbledore's attitude. "Sir, there is one other thing; I was wondering if I could get my key off you, for Gringotts?"

Dumbledore gave a grandfatherly smile. "I shall arrange for some money for you, if there is something you wish to buy, Harry."

"I'd prefer the key, sir. With the holidays coming up, I'll be going to Diagon Alley anyway. I can get money for myself."

Dumbledore looked sadly at him. "I'm afraid it may be quite dangerous for you, my boy. Of course, you will have to get your school things for next year. Perhaps I will have someone pass on

your key to you then. I'm sure you would enjoy seeing the Weasley's during the holidays, and they have taken you in previous years."

Dumbledore patted Harry on the shoulder and stood. "Well, I must be going. Do call me if you recall anything more, won't you Harry?"

Harry was peeved, but he nodded politely. "Yes sir."

As Dumbledore stood, Harry caught sight of Dumbledore's hand again. It was still black and withered and dead looking. "What happened to your hand sir?" he blurted out.

The headmaster shook his sleeve over his hand. "I was merely a little careless. Nothing to worry about."

Dumbledore left the infirmary, casting a sad look at a bed on the other side of the ward. Harry followed his gaze to the bed, which had a white curtain pulled around it. Swallowing tightly, Harry got out of bed and padded quietly across to the curtained off bed.

Slowly, he pulled the white curtain aside and his gaze fell upon his potions professor.

Snape's face was pale as death, his lank black hair spread over the pillow.

His face was more relaxed than Harry had ever seen it. There was no scowl, no sneer, no look of derision painted across his features.

This was a man who had saved his life on numerous occasions, who had guided him and taught him, who had spent hours upon hours helping him defend himself against Voldemort. This was a man who had spent years in the service of Voldemort, treading a fine line between life and certain death.

Harry felt an inexplicable shift in his perception of Snape at that moment, and his throat became tight.

Unable to think clearly, he stumbled from the room, making his way back to Gryffindor Tower. It was dinner time, and he met no one

along the way. He was more troubled than he could have imagined by the state that Snape was in, and Harry found himself truly and genuinely worried. He felt drained, completely exhausted. He guessed he must have apparated a lot further than the first time he had used the Pendant to cross through the castle's wards. Missing its weight around his neck and the touch of cool metal on his chest, and plagued with worry, he fell into a restless sleep.

oOo

Harry still had his potions exam and herbology exam to go, so he spent the next day studying, not leaving the common room until dinner time. He didn't get much done however, his sleep had been plagued with grizzly dreams of torture and screams, and on top of that, he could not stop worrying about Snape.

His classmates were curious about why he had been in the hospital wing the previous few days, but he did not tell them the truth. Everyone seemed to know that Snape had been gravely injured, and rumours were flying. Some people were saying he had been injured in the course of a Death Eater attack, during which he had been one of the masked men. Others were dead on the truth, claiming that he had been violently tortured by Voldemort.

...

Harry was leaving dinner when he was roughly pushed into a classroom. He drew his wand, but refrained from firing off a spell when he saw that it was Malfoy.

"Dr-"

"Did they see me, Potter? Did they see my face?" Draco hissed, his face inches from Harry's.

It took a moment before Harry realised who he was referring to – Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

"No! No, no one saw you," he reassured the Slytherin, who momentarily relaxed, but he tightened his grip on Harry's robes.

“Are you sure, because you’d better be bloody sure!”

“Of course I’m sure! The Invisibility Cloak was over you the whole time.”

Malfoy sneered angrily, but a look of relief passed over his face. Without another word, he spun and strode away.

“Have you heard anything about Snape today, or been to see him?” asked Harry, and Malfoy paused at the door.

“Why would I care to do that?”

Harry frowned, confused by Malfoy’s attitude, but before he could ask, the Slytherin was gone, his black cloak whipping through the door after him.

...

Instead of returning immediately to the common room as he had been planning, Harry went instead to the hospital wing, intent on seeing if Snape had improved. He was disappointed however, when Madam Pomfrey refused to let him past the door.

“I’m sorry Mr. Potter, but he’s not yet woken up.”

“How long is he going to be like this?”

Madam Pomfrey cast a sad look towards the curtained off bed and shook her head wearily. “I’m afraid I just can’t say. He sustained grievous injuries, some of which I could not heal with conventional magic. The Dark Curses especially, will take ongoing treatment.”

Harry trudged back to the Tower more worried than ever. All the times Harry had been injured, Madam Pomfrey had been able to heal him easily, but Snape was still unconscious.

oOo

Harry spent the weekend secluded in the chamber studying for herbology, Salz keeping him company from a sunny position near the window.

Around mid-afternoon, he was beginning to doze off, and his quill slipped from his fingers, rolling under the lounge.

Grumbling to himself, he got down on his knees and looked under the lounge. Flattening himself on the ground, he stretched out his arm to reach for the quill, but it was just out of his reach. He strained his arm, but the quill remained just out of his grasp.

“Stupid quill! Come on!”

His eyes widened in surprise when the quill rolled the two inches and into his outstretched fingers.

It was a second before he realised what he had just done.

“Salazar!” he hissed, straightening up. “I did it! Wandless magic.”

“Why are you sso sssurprised?” replied Salz. “You have done it before.”

“Yesss, but that wasss different. That wasss nearly accidental magic, when I needed it, this was not.”

“Sso you have learned a new ssskill?” asked Salazar.

“I sssupossse sssooo.”

Harry grinned as he sat back on the lounge. He tossed the quill onto the cushion beside his and held his arm out, hand open.

“Accio quill!” The quill wobbled, but did not come to his hand. He tried again. “Accio quill!”

He laughed with success when the quill soared through the air into his outstretched hand.



...

Much later that night when he finally grew tired of studying, he left the chamber and made his way to the hospital wing.

Walking seemed a bit of a hassle now, so used was he to using the Pendant to apparate to and from the chamber. He supposed he would have to get the Pendant back at some stage. After all, he could still easily get into Dumbledore's office through the paintings.

It was long after curfew, so he had his invisibility cloak on. He doubted Filch would be up however, even the grumpy old caretaker needed to sleep sometime. He entered the infirmary quietly, glancing around to make sure Madam Pomfrey was not there, but the room was quiet. It was past midnight; she was probably sleeping.

Moving closer to the bed, he pulled the cloak off and stared down at Snape.

"What the hell are you doing here, Potter?"

Harry started; he had thought the room was empty. He looked into the shadows and dimly saw that Malfoy was standing stone still against the wall, his cold grey eyes glinting in the light from the moon. He was staring at Snape with a foul, disgusted look, his jaw set in anger.

"I just came to see Snape."

Malfoy sneered, but didn't look at Harry. "You two must be pretty friendly if you're coming to see him in the middle of the night."

Harry gave a small smile. "Friendly isn't a word I would use to describe Snape, at least not when it comes to me. But I do... owe him a lot."

The look on Malfoy's face darkened. "All those detentions you had with Snape weren't detentions at all, were they? I never thought it was suspicious – Snape's always hated you, but you weren't scrubbing cauldrons or gutting frogs, were you?" spat Malfoy quietly,

still glaring malevolently at Snape. "He's been teaching you Occlumency, hasn't he? Was it just that, or Legilimency too? What use have you got for either of them?"

"He wasn't"

"Don't lie to me, Potter!" he hissed, snapping his head around for a moment to glare at Harry.

Neither of them spoke after that, and neither of them moved until Malfoy gave a short, sharp nod, as if coming to a silent decision and strode out the door.

oOo

It was the day before the potions exam, and Harry decided to dedicate the day to studying for it. He was searching through his trunk when he pulled out the potions text he had taken from the classroom when he had forgotten his own.

Forgetting his study for the moment, he opened the book with curiosity.

All through the book, the previous owner had scratched out instruction and scrawled their own improvements and notes across the pages. Not one page was unmarked by the untidy scrawl. Here and there, he (Harry thought the writing seemed to belong to a boy) had written spells, none of which Harry recognised, and given the numerous scratching out and corrections, Harry had the impression that the owner of the book had invented them himself.

Making a note to have a more thorough look at the book, he tore himself away from it and turned to his study.

oOo

Yay! I updated quickly this time. A bit shorter than usual, but I hope everyone liked it. The next one might be a bit short too, but I'm going to try and update again by the end of the week, and then twice next

week because after that I'll be back at uni and updates will probably be once a week at most.

oOo

I write and write for all of you, but few reviews make me so blue.

When you click the REVIEW link, I have to say I'm tickled pink.

Thanks to those who have reviewed, you make my day and feed my muse.

So let me know just what you think and another chapter I will ink.

AzulCeleste14, Kitten Cullen, PhoenixFlight72, nxkris, cyiusblack, Hieadg, Jensindenial3516, RockIII, La Mariane, black-heart-green-eyes, lifterflirt, Daisuke Shadow Kitsune, ams71080, Seaking.

and

name: thanks for the review : )

QuannanHade: Hey! Thanks for the review, as usual. Look forward to your next one lol : )

spatz: hehe glad you liked it. Yeah, what you say is probably true. Most likely I'll end up leaving it as it is. Thanks for the review : )

## End of Terms

Harry woke the next day from a troubled sleep. He hadn't had any visions – they were steadily decreasing as he improved at Legilimency – but he had been plagued by dreams and elusive memories. He was sure he had dreamed about the night they had rescued Snape, but he couldn't recall it now that he was awake. The whole of that night was a blur to him. He knew he had seen Snape being tortured, but he could recall nothing except agonised screams. After that, the night was a blank, leaving him with the nagging feeling that he was missing something important.

...

Harry's potions exam went quite well, he thought. It had been supervised by the professor who taught potions to the younger students and she had been quite pleasant, creating a relaxing atmosphere for them to work in.

The only thing that stopped Harry from doing his best work was the fact that he was still worried about Snape and now Malfoy as well.

He was confused by Malfoy's behaviour, both towards him and Snape since they had rescued the Potions Master.

After the potions exam, he cornered Malfoy to talk to him. The Slytherin had been in a perpetually bad mood, scowling all the time and snapping at everyone. It was no different now.

"What the hell do you want, Potter?" he hissed.

Harry frowned. "I need to talk to you."

"We have nothing to talk about!"

"I think we do. What's been your problem the last few days?"

“None of your damn business,” said Malfoy, looking for a way to escape around Harry.

“It is my business when you aren’t talking to me anymore and I have no idea why,” replied Harry hotly.

“I need to get Gaspard’s cage from the chamber,” said Malfoy, changing the subject abruptly.

A faint tinge spread across Malfoy’s face, and the Slytherin seemed to know it, because he became even angrier.

Harry hastened to comply before Malfoy exploded. He looked about ready to. “Fine. I’ll take you down there now. At least he could guarantee a few more minutes to talk to the Slytherin, and Malfoy might talk more when they weren’t somewhere where they could be overheard.

They walked in silence through the halls, Malfoy walking faster to get slightly ahead of Harry.

At Myrtle’s bathroom however, the Slytherin was forced to wait for Harry while he caught up and opened the entrance. He had a feeling now that he knew what was wrong with Malfoy, but he wasn’t sure how to broach the subject.

Down in the library, Malfoy shrunk the cage and placed it in a deep pocket.

Sensing that Malfoy wanted to make a quick escape, Harry took the opportunity to speak. “You can’t fault Snape for-”

“Don’t talk to me about that – that traitor!” hissed Draco, taking an aggressive step forward. He betrayed us. He betrayed my father, he betrayed me.”

Harry was at a loss for what to say in reply to that. He hadn’t realised that Malfoy had taken Snape’s being a spy so personally.

“I don’t think the side he chose had anything to do with you, Draco.”

"It's Malfoy to you, Potter. We aren't on a first name basis."

Harry pursed his lips at the comment, but continued. "Like I said, I don't think the side he chose had anything to do with you, and you really shouldn't take it so personally."

Malfoy advanced, a dangerous glint in his eye. "I trusted him! I've always trusted him, with everything, and now I find out that half the stuff I've told him has probably gone straight to Dumbledore!"

Harry frowned at that. Snape certainly didn't seem like the type to betray a confidence, and Harry told him so.

"Yeah? Well he didn't seem like the type to betray our cause and run to Dumbledore either!"

Harry didn't know how to respond, but Malfoy wasn't finished.

"I said once that our association would come to an end, Potter, and I think the time has come!"

With that, Malfoy swept away towards the tunnels without a backward glance, leaving Harry more troubled than ever.

oOo

Harry trudged down the corridor, feeling particularly put out after his conversation with the Slytherin.

He skirted warily around Professor Trelawney, who was swaying drunkenly down the corridor, a few sherry bottles clinking in her hand.

What he needed were a few quiet hours in the chamber, and he headed to Myrtle's bathroom, wishing he had the Pendant.

The library was cool, and the window provided a view of the huge, sparkling sky.

Sitting in a comfortable position, Harry cleared his mind and tossed his wand to the other end of the lounge.

He held out his hand. “Accio wand.”

The stick flew to his open hand, and he grinned happily.

He practiced the summoning charm for a while longer, finding that it was more difficult to summon things from further away. For a while after that he attempted a wandless alohamora, but had no luck.

Deciding he should get back to the Tower, he made his way up the stairs and past the basilisk.

Before he opened the sink, he pulled out the Map to make sure there were no unsuspecting girls there,

There wasn't, but something else caught his eye.

A number of dots had appeared around the corner from Dumbledore's office, appearing to come out of the wall, but Harry knew it must be the Room of Requirement they were coming from.

His heart stopped when he saw names that had no place in the castle – Bellatrix Lestrage... Fenrir Greyback... Not bothering to read of the rest of the names he jumped up, and grasped for the Pendant, before remembering with anger and frustration that Dumbledore had it. He raced from the chamber, taking the passageway that led to Gryffindor Tower.

It seemed to take an age, as he raced the tiny dots that were moving steadily through the castle, but he finally ascended the stairs that opened up on to the balcony in the common room. He saw Tonks immediately, sitting with Ron and Hermione at a table. Racing down the stairs, he called her name and she jumped up, sensing by the tone of his voice that something was wrong.

“Harry, what is it?”

“Death Eaters,” he panted, trying to catch his breath. “In the castle!” He handed her the Map, pointing out the names, and her face whitened.

“Owens!” she yelled, rounding towards the portrait hole. The Irish Auror appeared instantly, coming to her side. “Stay here; make sure this room stays safe.”

With that, she was gone through the portrait hole, and when Harry made to follow her, he was restrained by Owens. “We have to help!” he yelled.

“Harry! What’s happening?” asked Hermione.

He turned to her and Ron and repeated what he had told Tonks.

“Blimey! We have to do something,” whispered Ron.

Hermione looked around the room, and Harry saw that most of the room was trying to listen to their conversation.

As Harry watched, former members of the DA were walking over to them. “Wait! No! They can’t fight Death Eaters,” he hissed to Hermione and Ron.

“What’s going on here?” asked Owens, frowning at their whispered conversation. Harry ignored him.

“We’ve kept the DA up, Harry, even if you haven’t been there. We can help!”

“This is ridiculous,” he hissed.

“No, what’s ridiculous is you thinking you’re the only one who can fight to protect the things they care about!” said Ron roughly.

“Come on, Mione, let’s go. If Harry wants to help, I’m sure he’ll find his own way.” Ron pulled Hermione away and Harry stared in disbelief at Ron’s back for a few seconds before running to catch up with them, ignoring Owen’s calls for him to stay where he was.



Hermione was tapping the fake galleon with her wand.

Ron gave Harry a nod when he saw that he had joined them.

Around the common room, members of the DA were walking towards the portrait hole.

As soon as the DA had gathered Harry explained the situation and they broke up into groups to search the castle. Harry went with the other Gryffindors in the direction he had thought they Death Eaters were headed, and gradually they came upon a hallway obstructed by duelling witches and wizards.

There were already several Aurors there, and the DA members rushed in without hesitation.

The Aurors definitely needed the help; there were a good many Death Eaters here, and they had been severely outnumbered.

Not really in the mood to consider duelling etiquette, he stupefied a Death Eaters whose back was turned.

The others seemed to be holding their own, except for Parvati who was slumped against a wall.

At that moment, several more Auror members arrived and they finally had the numbers to beat the Death Eaters.

Suddenly, through the duelling witches and wizards, Harry caught a flash of blonde hair, and his stomach dropped. It couldn't be... Malfoy couldn't be fighting with the Death Eaters. He strained to see, but if he had been there at all, Malfoy was gone now.

He heard a feral growl, and turned to see Fenrir Greyback leap towards a familiar red-head, his claw-like hands slashing.

Bill toppled to the floor, Greyback straddling his chest and ripping and tearing at Bill with his sharp nails.

Harry swung his wand around, aiming at the were-wolf's back. Bill was screaming in pain and fear as Harry's curse hit its mark and Greyback slumped forward onto the redhead.

There was no time for Harry to check on Bill; he was immediately attacked by another Death Eater.

The masked man fired of a purple curse, and somewhere in the back of Harry's mind, he remembered it from the Department of Mysteries, and by instinct he cast the counter to the Poshtu Yut cutting curse.

"It's taking too long! The old man's not coming!"

The call sounded and at once the Death Eaters stopped attacking and began simply defending themselves as they tried to leave the corridor.

Several bodies remained on the floor – some Death Eaters and some not – as the battle moved towards the Entrance Hall.

The Death Eaters escaped through the doors and onto the sweeping lawns, a dozen students and Aurors chasing after them.

Harry aimed several spells at the retreating Death Eaters, but the Death Eaters had passed the gates and apparated, there was nothing more they could do. One had been stupefied, and Harry bound him in thick ropes.

Turning back towards the castle, he flinched at the sight of Dark Mark, a deathly green shadow hanging above one of the towers.

At the sight of it, the people on the lawns were once again spurred into action, racing back into the castle.

Back in the corridor where the fight had taken place, the Aurors arrested the few remaining Death Eaters and the rest of them enervated the students and Aurors who had been taken down. No one was seriously injured except for Bill, his face and chest a mass of bright red blood where Greyback had ripped into him.

Most of them then made their way to the infirmary to have their minor injuries tended to by an Auror, while Madam Pomfrey looked after Bill.

At some point Mrs. Weasley arrived, crying over Bill and fussing over the rest of her children. She pulled Harry into a hug as well. "Harry dear, I'm so glad you're alright. You children - running off to fight Death Eaters!" she sobbed. Harry patted her on the back, making her sob harder.

Everyone stood around quietly until Bill's fiancé Fleur arrived.

Leaving the Weasley family alone, Harry made his way to Gryffindor Tower, realising that he hadn't seen Dumbledore all night.

oOo

Dumbledore finally appeared around lunch the next day; at least, that's what Harry heard. Apparently he was in the hospital wing, though no one was sure what was wrong with him.

Harry didn't go to see him.

Bill had been taken to St. Mungo's to have his injuries cared for. No one was quite sure what would happen to him, as Greyback had not been transformed at the time.

oOo

Harry muddled through his last exam, herbology. He thought he might have done quite well, despite everything. All too soon, it was the day of the Leaving Feast. Early in the afternoon Harry made what was to be his last trip of the school year to the Chamber of Secrets. Descending into the library, he called Salazar's name and then walked over to the huge bay window, taking a few moments to admire the magnificent view of the canyon below before he drew the curtains all the way across.

Salz was waiting for him on the lounge when he walked back over, and he picked him up on the way out of the library.

In the Basilisk's Chamber, Harry set about fulfilling his main purpose for the visit to the Chamber.

Pulling several vials from his bag, he filled one with blood, a small one with a bit of venom, and one with small scales.

Packing them safely into his bag where they wouldn't break, and assuring Salz that the Basilisk really had never been his pet, he left the chamber and made his way to the Leaving Feast.

...

After the feast, Harry departed the Hall alone and headed to the Hospital Wing.

To his surprise, he saw Snape seated in his bed, his lank hair falling in his face as he marked what appeared to be an exam.

Harry stopped short, relief flooding through him.

"Mr. Potter," said Snape dryly, looking up from the exam, his red quill hanging ominously over it.

Harry wasn't sure what to say. He had not been expecting Snape to be awake. "Er... sir."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Is there a reason you are here, or have you simply come to gawk?"

"I came to see if you were awake yet."

"Well, as you can clearly see, I am."

Harry shuffled his feet. "Are you going to be alright?"

Snape shuffled the papers on his lap, bringing a new exam to the top. "Apparently so."

Harry nodded. "Well that's erm... good."

“Indeed. “ Snape gave a small scowl in Harry’s direction. “I am told I have you to thank.”

Harry shrugged. “And Malfoy.”

A troubled look passed over Snape’s face. “Yes, so I have heard,” he murmured.

“Malfoy’s been acting weird.”

The troubled look deepened, before Snape calmed his face into the usual smooth mask. “I am sure it is nothing of concern.”

Harry however wasn’t so sure. He had yet to see the Slytherin since the Death Eaters had attacked the castle, but he knew he was around. The question he wanted answered was whether Malfoy had been in the corridor that night.

Harry rocked on his toes, feeling awkward, “Er, well... goodnight sir.”

Snape didn’t reply, and Harry left, still feeling awkward.

...

Tonks was walking the opposite direction up the corridor to him when he left the infirmary, and he stopped her briefly to get the Map back. She handed it over without a comment, giving him a small smile.

“You know, Harry, I really don’t like being on such bad terms with you, and Ron and Hermione are quite upset about everything that’s gone on.”

“I would be if I were them,” replied Harry shortly. He too, didn’t like being on bad terms with Tonks, as they had always gotten on well, or with Ron and Hermione, but he had had it with people lying to him.

He continued on and by chance he came across Malfoy, as he was leaving the library.

“Malfoy,” he called, and the Slytherin paused for a split second before continuing on his way.

Harry caught up with him and leaned close. “I saw you that night. You were there, weren’t you?”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about, Potter,” snapped the Slytherin.

“You were with the Death Eaters. Did you know there was going to be an attack?”

Malfoy favoured him with a sneer. “Do you think I would tell you if I did?”

“I think you’re making a mistake, Malfoy. You’re making bad decisions that are going to lead you nowhere.”

“Stop trying to dictate my life. I’ve had enough of it from you, from everyone. My choices are my choices and no one else’s. I told you our association had come to an end, so stop seeking me out!”

With that, Malfoy sped up, almost running, and left Harry behind.

oOo

The next morning, Harry took an early morning walk around the lake before it was time to leave. As he was on the home stretch, he came across Dumbledore, who was staring with a troubled expression out over the lake, one hand caressing a golden locket.

The piece of jewellery reminded Harry of the Pendant.

“Professor, I was wondering if you had finished with my locket? I’d really like it back before the holidays.” Harry wasn’t particularly hopeful that he would get it back, and Dumbledore gave the expected answer.

The headmaster looked surprised to see Harry there, as if he hadn’t heard him coming, but he answered immediately. “I’m afraid not, Harry. It seems to have some very old and complex magic on it, and I

have not yet had the time to unravel it and inspect it. I cannot seem to figure out quite how it works.”

Harry felt smug that Dumbledore had not yet managed how to work the Pendant, and sincerely hoped he didn't ever, because if he did there was little chance Harry would get it back at all.

As it was, he knew he would not need it over the holidays, but he still wanted it back. It was important to him.

Saying goodbye to Dumbledore, who wished him a good holidays and promised to be in touch before returning to staring with a troubled expression out over the lake, Harry returned to the castle to collect his trunk. Students were already starting to assemble near the thestral-drawn carriages when he came to the huge doors that led into the Entrance Hall.

A half hour later at the Hogsmeade train station, Harry said goodbye to his friends and found a seat in an empty compartment, but it soon filled up with some giggling soon-to-be second years. Trying to ignore them, Harry spent the train journey reflecting on the year that had passed, feeling that there had been more downs than ups.

He was still at odds with Ron and Hermione. He missed them greatly, he had to admit it, and he wasn't all that angry at them anymore, but he just couldn't seem to bring himself to talk to them again.

Malfoy was an even bigger problem. He had thought he might have been getting through to the Slytherin, that they might have even been becoming friends, but then Snape had been found out and Malfoy had completely changed, becoming moody and aggressive.

And still he was weighed down by the prophecy. Dumbledore had said nothing about it the entire year, and yet he expected Harry to defeat Voldemort. And there was something going on with Dumbledore – his hand, the way he seemed so weary lately.

Harry thoroughly depressed himself on the train ride to King's Cross Station, and his bad mood was worsened when Uncle Vernon was

late, and he had to wait around on the platform with Tonks and Owens hovering around in the background.

Vernon finally appeared, scowling darkly around until his piggy eyes landed on Harry.

His uncle turned away with a grunt and Harry followed, lugging his trunk and Hedwig behind him.

The car was parked a fair way away, but his uncle didn't offer to help with Harry's luggage, not that he expected it.

They finally arrived at the car and Harry hauled his things into the trunk, and took Hedwig's cage with him, setting it at his feet in the car.

"Just think, boy," said Vernon nastily, speaking to him for the first time. "This is the last time we'll be stuck with you. After this, we never have to see you again!"

"Can't wait," replied Harry dryly, and Vernon gave a nasty chuckle, pulling out of the parking lot.

oOo

Aagh! It took me so long to update and I'm really, really sorry. Work and uni and life in general leave little time to write. Plus, I just got stuck, didn't have a clue what to write, so sorry if it seems rushed (or completely shit, which is my personal opinion). I know where I'm headed with the plot now, so the upcoming chapters should be pretty good.

I also promise to update no less than once a week.

I know the last two chapters were very short, but from now on they'll be back to a decent length (and quality, hopefully).

I'm going to be continuing this story into Harry's seventh year instead of starting a new one, as that's what most people seemed to want.

Thanks to reviewers:



black-heart-green-eyes, Jensindenial3516, vanessa riddle, nxkris, jabarber69, Darksider, Hieadg, DarkWill0w, wsbenge, Persidie, MadMogg, ams71080, La Mariane, RockIII, Forgotten Lake, aanim0, slashslut, alliekiwi.

and

QuannanHade: ooh 16! Happy (belated) birthday. I'm 19 and I still don't have my licence. I can drive, but there's this really long story behind why I don't have my licence yet... Anyway... your comments are much appreciated, thanks for reviewing : )

Infamous: Hey! Always good to see a new reviewer. Glad you like it, and I promise it will be finished. I won't ever abandon a story. Also, I was originally planning a sequel, but now I'm just going to continue this story into his seventh year. Thanks for the review ; )

name: no worries. Thanks for reviewing : )

Kokuyo: I agree – you don't get it.

anonymous: No, this isn't going to be slash. Never ever ever!

jon danforth: glad you liked it. thanks for reviewing : )

jon: don't know if you're the same jon... whether you are or not, thanks for all the reviews :P

## Striking Out

As the car pulled up at Number 4, Privet Drive, a sense of gloom settled over Harry, though perhaps not quite as pronounced as it had been in previous years.

He unloaded his things from the car and lugged it into the house and then began to lug it up the stairs until Vernon's voice stopped him.

"I don't think so, boy. I want all your freaky things down here."

Harry frowned. This may put a bit of a wrench in his plans, but if he worked hard, it shouldn't make things too much more difficult.

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," he replied robotically, and dragged the trunk around the bottom of the stair to the cupboard. Pulling it open, he pushed his trunk in and closed the door. He supposed he should be glad they weren't destroying his things like they had the previous summer, and he could only assume that someone had talked to them.

Vernon snapped a shiny new padlock on with a sickening grin.

"What was wrong with the last one?" asked Harry, referring to the heavy duty padlock.

"Only the best for you, Potter," replied Vernon with ill-concealed glee, rattling the lock before shuffling away.

Harry rolled his eyes and took the stairs two at a time. He reached the landing just in time to collide with Dudley, who gave him a hard shove.

Harry waved his fingers spookily at Dudley and his cousin's eyes widened. Spluttering, and tripping as he walked backwards, Dudley escaped back to his room and Harry to his, both of them shutting their respective doors harder than was necessary.

He deposited Hedwig's cage on the desk and let her out, opening the window in case she wanted to hunt. He removed Salz from his pocket, the snake giving a hiss of relief at finally being allowed out after the long train ride and then the car ride.

Harry laid down on the bed whose sheets, judging from the musky smell, had not been changed since the last time he had been there. He stared up at the ceiling for a brief moment and then slipped the old padlock from his pocket.

It was slightly rusty, leaving a faint trace of brown on his fingers, and it was locked tight. He swung it on his finger a few times and then held it still, clearing his mind.

After a few moments, he opened his eyes and focussed on the padlock. "Alohamora," he whispered. The last thing he wanted was for the Dursleys to hear him doing magic, though there wasn't much they could do to stop him except keep him busy with chores.

The lock remained firmly shut, though he tried the spell numerous times and holding the lock in different ways.

Perhaps it would work if he tried doing it with the wand movement? Accio had no wand movement, but Alohamora required the caster to tap the lock with their wand.

Harry sat the lock on the bed and held his index finger out straight. This time when he incanted, he tapped the lock lightly with his finger.

He couldn't quite explain why, but it felt slightly different to holding the lock, though it still didn't unlock.

After a while, he took a break to stretch his legs a bit, walking several circles around his room.

He had been asked to send a letter to the Order every three days again, though he suspected the reasons this year were different to last year's.

He went downstairs into Vernon's study and returned to his room with a blank A4 sheet of paper and a blue ballpoint pen. Sitting at the small desk, he composed a short letter to Dumbledore.

Professor Dumbledore,

I'm writing like you asked.

I'll write again in three days.

Harry

There really wasn't much else for him to say, so he rolled up the brief missive and tied it to Hedwig's leg. His snowy owl took flight, heading north towards Hogwarts.

Harry flopped back down on the bed and focussed once again on the old padlock.

...

Aunt Petunia called him down for dinner at six o'clock, and he descended to the kitchen. He hadn't seen his Aunt since he had arrived back at Privet Drive, but she was as thin-lipped and horse-faced as always.

He sat in his usual chair and Petunia placed a plate in front of him.

Harry ate quickly and was standing to leave when Vernon told him to sit.

"Now boy, we've got a few things to discuss." His uncle turned a foul scowl on him.

"What might that be," asked Harry, crossing his arms and settling back for a lecture.

"Don't take that attitude with me, Potter! This is your last stay with us, and we want it as normal as possible. None of your magic in this house!"

"I'm not allowed to do magic out of school," he intoned. Although, he thought, he would be seventeen soon and he would legally be allowed to use magic outside of Hogwarts.

"And there'd better not be any more of your freaky friends suddenly appearing in our house, boy!"

Harry had forgotten that he had apparently apparated himself, Malfoy, and Snape into the cupboard under the stairs.

"Er... there won't be."

"Good," sniffed Aunt Petunia.

Vernon stood and glared down at Harry. "That's all, now get upstairs to your room, boy. We don't want to hear a word from you for the rest of the night."

Heaving a sigh of frustration, he left the kitchen and headed to the bathroom, ignoring a snide parting comment from his uncle. Not long now.

...

Later that night Harry stepped out of his room and heard a crunch as something was crushed by his foot. Cursing, he stepped back to see a broken teacup, cold tea now soaking the carpet of the hallway. Shaking his head and wondering if it was Dudley's idea of a joke, he picked up the pieces and threw them in the bin, returning to his room with a bucket of water and a rag.

oOo

The next few days passed with irritating slowness. Vernon and Petunia kept him busy each day with chores; cleaning leaves from the gutters, repainting the front fence, sweeping out the shed.

It was while he was on the ladder filling a bag with handfuls of leaves that Petunia approached him.

“Harry!” she called sharply.

He looked down at her, wiping his sweating brow with the back of a gloved hand.

“Yes, Aunt Petunia?”

“Come down here.”

Harry stepped down the ladder and came to stand in front of his Aunt. Her lips were pursed tightly

“That night you turned up here with those other two.”

She stopped, and it seemed she had left a question unasked.

“Yes?” he prompted.

“That man – Snape – what happened to him?”

Harry looked down, frowning. He couldn’t imagine why his Aunt would care what happened to someone he knew.

“He was tortured.” Harry paused for a moment before adding, “By Voldemort.”

His Aunt’s face paled slightly. “Why?”

“Erm... Snape was a spy for the Order of the Phoenix. That’s a group fighting against Voldemort. My parents were -”

“Yes, yes, I know,” she murmured, surprising Harry. Petunia was staring off into the distance.

“Er... Aunt Petunia?”

She shook her head slightly, looking back at him. “And how do you know him? You must know him quite well to bother rescuing him.”

Harry shrugged. "I don't know him well, really. He's a teacher at my school."

"He teaches at your school?" His Aunt looked surprised at this.

"Yeah, why?"

Suddenly his Aunt's expression became closed, and she stood straighter. "Lunch will be ready shortly. Finish up with this chore and then come inside."

It was only as she was walking away that Harry began to wonder how on Earth she knew Snape's name.

...

He climbed into bed that night with the same question running through his head. How did his Aunt know Snape's name? It was possible whoever had turned up to collect them had told her, but it was still odd for her to mention him specifically, and he thought that perhaps there was something more to it.

When he fell asleep, he dreamed again of the night they had rescued Snape, but again when he woke he could not remember it, much to his frustration. He was sure something important had happened and it niggled away at him.

oOo

The next day he sent his second letter off, this time to Lupin. It was a little longer than the one to Dumbledore had been, and somewhat more friendly.

Harry felt an odd sort of satisfaction as he watched Hedwig disappear into the distance.

When he could no longer see her, he moved to sit on his bed, once more with the padlock lying in front of him on the tangled sheets.

Holding out his finger, he tapped it and spoke, "Alohamora."

The lock clicked open.

His satisfaction grew.

oOo

On Monday morning after Vernon had left for work and Dudley had left for the shopping centre with Piers Polkiss, Petunia surprised Harry by telling him he could leave the outside chores for today.

Harry was glad, he was quite stiff from having spent the day before weeding the verge.

Instead, she had him help prepare lunch for the two of them, and then later, dinner. Apart from that, he was free to do as he wanted.

Most of the time he spent thinking about the conversation he had had with his Aunt as they prepared and ate lunch.

She had been standing at the sink shredding lettuce, and he had been getting cutlery when she had spoken.

"I am sorry for what Vernon did to you last time you were here," she said stiffly.

"It doesn't matter," muttered Harry after a pause, surprised by her admission.

Petunia sighed. "Yes it does. Your mother would hate me if she knew I let that happen."

Harry didn't know how to reply. His Aunt had never really talked about his mother to him before.

They finished getting the food ready in silence, and then sat opposite each other at the small kitchen table.

Drawing a deep breath, Harry finally spoke. "What was she like?"



Petunia's eyes flickered to his, and then away again, and he was sure an expression like pain passed across her face. It was a while before she answered.

"She was... Lily. Always happy, always kind. We were... close." Petunia drew a shaky breath before continuing. "We didn't live in such a nice area as this." She waved her hand vaguely. "But Lily brought a sort of light wherever she went. Nowhere was quite so dismal when she was there. I remember when we were little girls; we were forever playing in the park or the small woods that were close to where we lived."

She paused again, staring off into space, as though she were recalling long forgotten memories. "She would give anyone a chance. Not like me."

Harry wondered at the disjointed tale, and supposed his Aunt was reliving a particular memory.

"She was always doing odd little things, and we were both fascinated by the things she could do. Then of course her letter came. We grew apart after that. She was gone most of the year, and when she came back I didn't understand her quite as well as I had before. People change."

"Did she change much," asked Harry softly. "After she went to Hogwarts?"

His Aunt sighed. "She became stronger, more independent. She didn't need me anymore. But she was still the same happy, kind person." She shook her head. "Oh, I don't know why I'm saying all this. These things should be forgotten! Well, it doesn't matter anymore." His Aunt stood and robotically began to clean up the table, despite the fact that neither of them had finished lunch.

Taking the hint, Harry stood and left the kitchen.

He did however, pause in the door way and look back at his Aunt. "Thank you."

...

When Harry went up to his room that night, he found on his bed a chain, and he recognised it with a shock. It was his Aunt's, for as long as he could remember she had worn it.

He picked it up with a frown and wondered what it was doing on his pillow.

Hanging on the chain were two rings. They were clearly meant to be worn separately, but they could be joined as one ring as well. One was gold with clear stones, the other silver with little yellow stones.

He tried to slide the rings onto his finger, but they were too small. As he watched though, one became larger, until he could quite comfortably wear it.

He realised with a start that the rings had a charm on them, and knew that his mother must have done it.

His suspicion was confirmed as he inspected the rings closer. The gold one had an inscription on the inside; 'To Lily, with love. Petunia.' The now smaller ring also had an inscription: 'Friends forever, Toney! Love Lily.' AT the end of the sentence was a small rune, which Harry recognised as one for protection.

He wondered why his Aunt was giving him the necklace, and then recalled what she had said earlier in the kitchen. She wanted to forget. He couldn't imagine why. Perhaps she had regrets. She wanted to move on. Harry could understand that.

oOo

The next day, his Aunt had returned to her usual unpleasant self, stoically standing behind Vernon as he berated Harry for not having completed his chores the previous day.

Harry simply rolled his eyes and headed out to the garden.

He was mowing the lawn when he saw something that made him feel a lot better; Hedwig appeared, soaring through the air and into his open bedroom window.

He finished mowing before it got dark and headed inside for a shower. Then he returned to his room and waited for night to fall.

He was interrupted however, by a quiet knock on the door. He opened it to find Dudley shuffling his feet nervously.

“Dudley, what is it?”

“Can I come in?”

Harry raised an eyebrow, but stepped back, allowing Dudley into the room.

His cousin walked in, and Harry realised that Dudley had lost a lot of weight since the last time he had seen him.

“Looks like that grapefruit diet worked, Duds.”

Dudley scowled in remembrance of the diet, and he shook his head. “It was those things.”

Harry looked at him quizzically. “What things?”

“Those things that attacked us last summer. They med me see... things.”

Harry frowned. “The Dementors?”

Dudley nodded, shivering. “I couldn’t sleep for weeks without having nightmares. Mum wanted to take me to a doctor, but I convinced her not to. I said they wouldn’t know anything about... you know,” Dudley lowered his voice to a whisper, “Magic.”

Harry flopped down on his bed, still frowning about what Dudley was saying. “Well, you’re probably right there; they wouldn’t have been able to help you much. Are you still having nightmares?”

Dudley shook his head. "No, not really. But I feel different, like they did something to me."

Harry looked at his cousin, who was trembling at the memory. He really did seem changed, actually, now that Harry looked closer. He thought over the past few days and realised Dudley hadn't once insulted or threatened him.

"Don't worry, Duds. They didn't do anything to you; it's all mental."

Dudley narrowed his eyes. "I'm not mental!"

Harry sighed. "That's not what I mean. Dementors suck out your soul – believe me, you'd know if that had happened. If you've changed," Harry shrugged, "It's just because you changed, not because they did anything to you."

Perhaps the near death experience had frightened Dudley into getting his act together a bit, and Harry thought that that probably wasn't a particularly bad thing.

"Yeah," Dudley muttered. "Maybe you're right."

There were several minutes of silence during which Harry stared at the ceiling and Dudley looked around the empty room, avoiding going anywhere near Hedwig.

"Thanks," grunted Dudley.

"Huh?"

"Thanks. I mean, I know you saved me from those things. I didn't tell Dad, but that's only because I was shaken up. But I know what you did."

"Oh, well, that's alright. I might not like you much, but I wasn't going to let you have your soul sucked out."

Dudley frowned slightly, but then perked up. "Want to go to the park?" he asked.

"What?" Harry sat up.

"I'm going for a walk. Want to come?"

Harry thought about it for a moment. He wasn't really supposed to leave the house, but he knew if he did that someone from the Order would be following him. Another thought occurred to him, and he stood up enthusiastically. "Sure, Duds, why not? Let's just stop downstairs on our way out."

Dudley nodded and they went down the stairs, Dudley calling into the kitchen that they were going out.

Instead of going straight out the front door, Harry went round to the cupboard under the stairs.

Dudley followed, but Harry motioned towards the end of the stairs. "Wait there and make sure your mum doesn't come."

Dudley frowned, but did as he was told, keeping one eye on Harry and the other in the kitchen doorway.

Clearing his mind and focussing, Harry tapped the shiny new padlock. "Alohamora."

A small click sounded in the hallway as the lock popped open, and Harry grinned at Dudley, whose eyes were wide.

Harry dove into the cupboard and dragged out his trunk, flipping the latches and opening the lid.

His belonging lay in there and he grabbed out his invisibility cloak, thinking that he probably should have had it with him the whole time. He had been told to keep it with him at all times.

He closed his trunk and slid the cloak over it, and the trunk disappeared from sight. Dudley audibly gulped.

“Want to help me out her, Duds?”

Dudley nodded reluctantly.

“I need you to grab the other end of the trunk there. Just feel around and you’ll find the handle.

Dudley came forward and felt around, his eyes wide. They both found a handle and lifted the trunk into the air. Harry knew they were going to have to be careful. He didn’t want whoever was following him to realise they were carrying the trunk, and he told Dudley so.

They left the house, walking about a metre apart, and Harry thought they were doing a pretty good job of looking casual, despite the fact that the trunk was fairly heavy.

The park was only a few blocks away, but Dudley was panting and Harry’s fingers were feeling like they were going to drop off by the time they got there.

“Alright, Dudley. We just need to put this down somewhere it won’t be seen,” muttered Harry. He though the Order member would keep their distance, and he was just hoping they weren’t using any listening charms.

Dudley pointed to a small, dark reserve of pine trees on the far side of the park and Harry nodded. They headed over to it and as soon as they passed around a thick bush, they dropped the trunk. Harry quickly stuffed his cloak into his pocket and they did a quick circuit of the small reserve before heading back to the playground and settling on the swings.

They chatted amiably for a while, and Harry found he quite enjoyed it. He couldn’t believe how much Dudley had changed.

...

Dinner was a quiet affair. His Aunt had barely spoken a word to him since the day she had spoken about Lily, Dudley had been

abnormally quiet the whole time he had been back, and Vernon never talked much while he was eating anyway.

Glad to be out of the awkward silence, Harry left as soon as he had finished eating. To his surprise, Dudley followed him up to his room.

"You're leaving, aren't you? That's why you took all your stuff to the park."

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, I'm leaving. Tonight, actually."

"Oh." Dudley's voice was small, and he sounded somewhat disappointed.

"Mm," murmured Harry. He was slightly disappointed that he wasn't going to get to know this new Dudley, but it really wasn't enough to keep him there.

"D'you think maybe... you could write? You know, just if you have the time or whatever..." asked Dudley, stammering slightly.

"Sure, Duds. I think I could find the time."

Dudley gave a grin then, and Harry returned it. It solved another problem he had been facing.

...

That night Harry waited for the sounds of his uncle's snoring to start before he moved from his bed.

He changed quickly and slipped his wand into his pocket. Salz curled himself around Harry's neck with a quiet hiss, and Harry grabbed Hedwig's cage, quietly ushering her into it. Thankfully she kept quiet, and he left the room, not sparing it another glance.

He paused when he reached the landing though. Putting Hedwig's cage down, he spent a few minutes walking through the house, not really sure why he was doing it. He had no fond memories of this place, but for the first eleven years of his life it had been home.

He left the letter he had written for the Dursleys on the kitchen table. It was short, explaining that if they informed anyone that he was gone that there would be trouble and he would most likely wind up being brought back there to stay the rest of the holidays with them. He was quite sure Vernon would be quite happy to have him gone and would willingly lie to anyone who came asking. He had also impressed these points upon Dudley, who had grudgingly agreed to help him.

He slipped quietly out the back door and around the side of the house, jumping over the front fence instead of opening the gate.

He cast one last look at the house he had grown up in, and noticed a dark figure watching from the living room window. It was Dudley, and he almost raised his hand to wave before he remembered he was invisible. Turning away, Harry started off down the street.

...

The park was dark and quiet. Harry hurried to the reserve of pine trees and found his trunk as he had left it. He performed another wandless Alohamora and opened the trunk, pulling out his broomstick, which lay diagonally across his trunk, barely fitting.

He tied the trunk to the underside of his broomstick and threw a leg over his broom.

It rose slowly with the weight of the trunk, but gradually he was high enough that he didn't think anyone would easily see any part of his trunk or broom not covered by the cloak.

...

It was dawn by the time he settled down in London and he headed directly for King's Cross Station.

He wasn't entirely sure where he was going to go; admittedly he hadn't thought that far ahead, so consumed had he been with simply getting away from Privet Drive without being seen.



He looked over the list of departing trains and saw one that left at midday for a place called Pembroke Dock. He wasn't sure, but he thought it might be on the coast somewhere. He had only seen the ocean twice before; the first time when the Dursleys had gone on a trip to Southend-On-Sea, and the second time when they had been escaping from Harry's letters and had found shelter in the Hut on the Rock.

Harry smiled at the memory and thought that he would like to see the ocean again.

He dragged his trunk to a bathroom and hid it in a cleaner's room, under an empty bench. He removed a few things he would need and then locked it, fairly certain that it would be safe for the short time he was gone.

He would be back to catch the train in a few hours, but first he had to make a little trip to Diagon Alley.

Unfortunately, he couldn't use his wand to change his appearance, and he just hoped he wouldn't be recognised.

Before he went anywhere near the Leaky Cauldron and Diagon Alley, he ducked into a muggle building and went to the bathrooms.

He had taken some hair-gel he had found in the bathroom cupboard at Privet Drive. He wasn't entirely sure whose it was; Vernon wouldn't use the product, and his Aunt Petunia was more of a hairspray kind of woman, and he had a sneaking suspicion it had belonged to Dudley.

Facing the mirror, he unscrewed the lid and scooped out some of the goop. Cringing at the chemical fruity smell and the slimy feel on his head, he smoothed it into his hair, and for once his hair stayed down. He swept his hair over in the way he had often seen Uncle Vernon comb his hair, and it hid his scar perfectly. It dried quickly, and his hair felt like plastic.

Just the different hairstyle changed his look quite a bit, and he thought that as long as he didn't see anyone he knew, he would be okay.

For good measure, he tucked his glasses into a pocket and slipped on a pair of sunglasses he had swiped off the kitchen table as he had left. He couldn't see very well, but he wouldn't fall down any manholes, either.

Trying not to laugh at his slightly absurd appearance, he hurried to the Leaky Cauldron. No one paid him any attention as he walked through the pub and out the back, boosting his confidence that his disguise would hold.

The apothecary wasn't the one he usually went to for his school supplies, and as he walked in the man at the counter didn't spare him a second glance.

Harry waited until the shop was empty before approaching the counter.

The man looked up at him, expecting Harry to deposit his purchases on the counter.

Harry spoke. "I'd like to sell some ingredients."

The man eyed him with little interest. "I have a regular supplier for most ingredients."

"Not for these ingredients," argued Harry lightly, slipping three vials from his pocket. He had gathered scales, venom and blood on his last trip to the chamber, and he set them on the cupboard. "Basilisk parts," he said quietly, and the man's eyes widened.

"You'll be the one selling the stock in Hogsmeade, then."

Harry paused. "Perhaps."

The man eyed him more carefully, and then picked up a vial to inspect it. "You seem very young. Where did you come across these?"

Harry gave a small smile. "I couldn't tell you that."

The man seemed to have expected the answer. "Alright, I'll give you 80 Galleons for the lot then."

Harry nodded in agreement at the price. It was enough for any school things he would need for next year, and to last him through the holidays.

Harry took the bag of money that the man filled for him and left quickly, heading back to the train station.

He stopped twice; first at Gringotts, exchanging some of his galleons for pounds, and then again at another apothecary where he purchased several doses of polyjuice potion.

At King's Cross Harry bought his ticket and then found a small cafe where he ate breakfast.

At midday he boarded the train, and with a thrill of elation he had never felt before, he left London.

oOo

Pembroke Dock was a fairly quiet town, and not many people were left on the train by the time it arrived, though many were waiting to board.

The air smelled salty and Harry made his way out into the street. He ducked out of sight for a moment and tied his trunk to his broomstick again, and then threw his cloak over it. He could walk freely now, with the trunk and broom floating behind him, and he followed the sound of waves until he arrived at a rocky stretch of coastline.

The sea was steely grey and the wind had a chill, despite the fact that it was the middle of summer.

There was a ferry docked in the harbour nearby and on a whim, Harry made his way down there.

There were crowds gathering and Harry made his way over to a ticket seller's window. A board said that the ferry was headed to Rosslare, Ireland. He suddenly recalled something Seamus had said once: "We don't get any Death Eaters up our way, in Ireland. Not yet, anyway."

Yes, that would be nice, thought Harry, to be somewhere there were no Death Eaters. With that thought in mind, he purchased a one-way ticket for twenty five pounds and joined the line of people who were waiting for the ferry.

He was extremely excited. He'd never been on a boat before (if he discounted row boats) and he couldn't wait to get on board.

No sooner had he had the thought then the line began to move and no more than three minutes later Harry was sitting in a comfortable lounge with his trunk at his feet and Hedwig's cage beside him.

Fifteen minutes later the ferry, which was called Inishmore, began to move and Harry left the lounge and headed for the deck.

He opened Hedwig's cage and watched as she soared over the ship.

The trip was just under four hours. Harry spent a while on the deck, letting the wind throw salty sea spray over him. Walking was a challenge as the ferry rocked on the waves, and he found it quite entertaining watching people trying to walk around the deck.

After a while it started to rain, and Hedwig came back to him. He staggered over to a door and went back to the lounge where he could watch out the windows.

...

It was raining when the ferry arrived in Rosslare Harbour and Harry followed a large group of people off of the boat.

He felt strange walking on solid land after the rocking ferry, and he stumbled quite a bit as he walked to collect his trunk.

There was a small motel not far from the dock and Harry paid for a single room for the night.

It was as he was finding some dry clothes from his trunk that he heard a tapping on the window and turned to see a grey owl tapping at the window.

Frowning and hoping that this didn't mean anyone could trace him here, Harry opened the window and let the bedraggled bird fly into the room.

The disgruntled owl immediately attacked Hedwig's owl treats, much to the snowy owl's annoyance.

Harry removed the wet letter from the owl and looked at the address. It was from Hermione.

He carefully removed the letter from the envelope and unfolded it. The ink had run a bit, but it was still readable.

Dear Harry,

I know you're still angry at me, but please finish the letter.

I miss you – I miss being your friend, and I'm so sorry for lying to you about everything. I thought we were doing the best thing for you, and I know you don't think that's justification for lying, but that is the reason and I can't defend my actions any more than that.

You should know that Ron wanted to tell you about Tonks; in fact I think he was going to, despite the fact that we'd had dozens of conversations about how he wasn't supposed to. He's been quite upset about the whole thing, and I think you should forgive him, because I hate seeing you two fighting even more than I hate fighting with you.

I really am sorry, Harry, and I hope you can forgive at least one of us.

I hope you'll be coming to Bill and Fleur's wedding and that I'll see you there.

Love, Hermione.

Harry sighed and put the letter aside. Something had to be done about the situation. He'd been angry when he had found out they had known about Tonks, but looking back after so many months it really didn't seem like such a big thing, even though it had felt like a huge betrayal at the time.

He had missed his two best friends the past few months, though probably not as much as he should have, what with having the chamber and Malfoy's companionship.

Thinking about Malfoy made him begin to worry. He wondered if the Slytherin had taken the Dark Mark yet. It had certainly seemed that that was the path Malfoy had chosen towards the end of the term, and Harry wondered yet again if Malfoy had had anything to do with the attack on Hogwarts.

Clearing his mind of the depressing thoughts, Harry practiced Legilimency for a while before falling asleep.

oOo

The next morning before he left the motel Harry scrawled a quick note to the Order assuring them that he was well and good at Privet Drive, and sent the grey owl on its way.

Rosslare was quiet except for the occasional car as he set off. He had no idea where he was headed, but it was that fact which gave him a sense of freedom he had never felt before.

He could hardly believe he was here, and that nobody – nobody – knew where he was.

He continued to walk in the early morning quiet and eventually found himself away from Rosslare and on a muddy, rutted road surrounded

by fields. The road he had taken had veered away from the coast some time ago, and he could no longer see the ocean or smell salt on the breeze.

His trunk floated behind him, hanging from his broom and covered by his invisibility cloak. It occurred to him that he should practice wandlessly performing Wingardium Leviosa, or a shrinking spell so that he could carry the trunk in his pocket.

Sometime after he stopped for lunch, he found himself at a crossroad, taking another break. He was sitting on his trunk and trying to decide which way he should go when a quiet rumble sounded behind him and he looked over his shoulder to see a truck slowly ambling along the potholed road.

To his surprise, the truck slowed down and pulled up alongside him.

A fair-haired man stuck his head out the window. "Looking for a lift, are ye?"

Harry looked back the way he had come and then the way he was going. He had been walking for hours and come across not much, and he wasn't sure how far it was to the next town.

"I suppose so," he replied.

"Get in, then. Ye'll not be wanting to walk all the way to the next town."

Harry nodded his thanks and headed around to the passenger side, hefting his trunk onto the back of the truck on his way around.

He climbed into the truck and the man began to drive again.

"Have you a name, then, lad?"

"Harry," he replied, and reached across to shake the man's calloused hand.

"Niall. You'll be English, then?"

Harry nodded. "I'm on my school holidays at the moment, and I thought I'd have a look at Ireland." He gave a small smile. "I've never been overseas before."

Niall chuckled. "Welcome to Ireland, then. How do you like it so far?"

"Well, I only got here yesterday evening, and today I've just been walking down this road, so I haven't seen much at all. It seems nice, though. It's peaceful."

The man nodded in agreement. "That it is."

They drove in silence for a while before the man spoke again. "Where are you headed?"

Harry grinned. "That's a good question. I'm not really sure."

"So you have no plans for your holiday?"

Harry shook his head. "Just wandering."

"Hm... well perhaps I can offer you a job? I need a hand on the farm, and I just dropped my previous helper off at the dock. I can offer you food and board, plus a small wage."

Harry jumped at the opportunity. He hadn't had any idea what he was going to do, and since his path had led him here, he saw no reason to turn Niall down.

They drove for another hour and through a small town called Castleknock before they came to Niall's farm.

It was dark by the time the old red truck pulled up, and the night was silent.

"You can sleep in the barn here," said Niall, pulling up beside a large wooden building.

Harry glanced at it uncertainly.



“Don’t worry, it’s quite warm and we’ve set up a living space in there. You’ll be nice and comfortable. I’ll talk to you tomorrow about some work.”

Harry nodded his thanks and went through the small door in the side of the barn. It was mostly empty inside, except for a work bench and some farming equipment. Directly to his left was a set of stairs and Harry went up them, finding the loft to be quite comfortable looking.

It was one large open space, except for what looked like a small bathroom in one corner. There was an old spring bed against one wall and a very small, square table with two chairs in the middle of the room.

To another wall a small and basic kitchen was set up.

Harry went back down the stairs and dragged his trunk up, the pulled out a dry set of pyjamas and got ready for bed.

oOo

Sorry about not updating on Sunday like I said I would. Not my fault though, for once. There was some problem with the site.

I really love Ireland, never been there though, so Harry is going for me. I’m planning for Harry’s holidays to be over and done within two or three chapters, so if you don’t like the direction the story has taken, hold in there and he’ll be back at Hogwarts soon, and you’ll see more of Malfoy and the chamber. : )

Please review and tell me what you think!

Thanks to cyiusblack, fhippogriff, nxkris, La Mariane, ams71080, Vanessa riddle, jenstarfire, SHuntress, Jensindenial3516, Forgotten Lake, black-heart-green-eyes, tallica343

and

alex: No, Harry's not retarded. If you need clarification on anything else, feel free to review again...

QuannanHade: hehe ur reviews always make me laugh. Thanks for reviewing : )

Kris: Thank you! And thanks for reviewing, as always : )

‘Insert Imaginative Title Here’

Harry was just getting into bed when he felt a stab of anger. His scar prickled, and he knew the anger and frustration was not his own. No vision accompanied the feeling however, and he reasoned that anything that angered Voldemort could only be good for him.

oOo

Harry woke to the smell of rain, fresh grass, hay and animals. Breathing deeply, he smiled and opened his eyes to the dim sunlight shining through the window of the barn. To him, it was the smell of freedom.

He stood and stretched languidly, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and brushing some stray strands of straw from his pants.

He opened his trunk and pulled out a clean shirt and then went down the stairs to the ground floor of the barn. He pushed open the smaller door and stepped out, finding himself looking out over rolling farmlands.

The sun was only just peeking up over the horizon, casting a dull light over the land.

In front of him was a paddock and he walked to the edge of it. Leaning on the wooden fence, he looked out over the field of animals. Pigs were gathered around a muddy patch nearby and further away cows and a few horses grazed.

“Mornin’ to ye,” came an Irish accented voice behind him. Turning, he saw a teenage girl standing behind him holding a tea towel. She had pale skin and a light smattering of freckles across her nose, and her hair was a deep brown.

“Hi,” he replied. “I’m Harry.”

"I know. Me mam told me to come fetch you for breakfast. She said you can eat with us, if you like. My dad's already gone for the day, but he said he'll be back later to talk to ye about the work you wanted."

"Oh, thanks. That's great."

She nodded, smiling, dimples on her cheeks. "Well, house is this way. Come on."

Harry followed the girl, looking around at the green fields that surrounded the house. He could faintly hear the sounds of the farm animals that scattered the fields.

Noticing that he had fallen behind the girl's brisk pace, he jogged a bit to walk beside her. "So er, what's your name?"

"Aislinn McKenna. What brings ye to Kreeside?"

"Kreeside?"

She nodded. "That's the name of our farm."

"Oh, well I just wanted to get away from London for a while. Travel a bit. I'm only staying for my holiday break."

He followed Aislinn into the house, the door opening into a warm kitchen.

A woman who looked exactly like Aislinn except older was cooking at the stove, but turned to greet them.

"You'll be Harry then? I'm Ana."

Harry shook her hand. "Nice to meet you."

"And you, dearie. Have a seat, now. Breakfast won't be a moment."

Harry sat down in the chair next to Aislinn, exchanging a smile with her. The three of them had a friendly chat about their respective

schools and where Harry was from while they ate the food Ana had cooked. They were just finishing when the rumble of a truck was heard. It stopped in the yard and a minute later the back door banged open, admitting a smiling Niall. "Girls, Harry."

Niall took a seat at the table, across from Harry. "So, young Harry, are ye still interested in some work?"

Harry nodded his head enthusiastically. "There's one thing, though. There's a wedding I have to go to, and I'll probably be staying there for a while, maybe a bit less than two weeks. Will that be a problem?"

Niall shook his head and clapped Harry on the shoulder. "Not at all, lad. Aislinn here and I will get along just fine without you for a few days."

oOo

Harry groaned and closed his eyes as he laid down on his bed. He had never realised how weak he was before. Quidditch may have toned his muscles, but it certainly hadn't built any, and he was aching from head to toe from the lifting and dragging and walking he had done all day.

First Aislinn had shown him how to milk a cow, saying he wouldn't be doing this usually, but that it was an essential part of the farm experience. Then the tough work had begun. He had helped Niall put up a fence, first loading a trailer with stakes and wire and then heading to a paddock and hammering them into the ground. They hadn't gotten very far when they had stopped for lunch, and Harry had wolfed down two helpings of stew and about five pieces of bread. After that they had worked on the fence some more, and then Niall said they could take a break to do something else.

They had driven around several paddocks then, lugging rocks into the trailer and taking them back to the house for a garden that Ana wanted to make.

After that, Niall had taken pity on Harry and let him off for the day.

Suddenly something dropped onto Harry's stomach and he jumped, his eyes flying open.

An owl hooted and he saw a brown owl sitting near Hedwig's cage, nibbling at the owl treats. Harry picked up the letter that had been dropped on him and opened it.

Harry,

The first thing I want to do is apologise. I already have, but I'm saying it again because I'm not too sure you listened before. The second thing I want to say is that I hope you want to be friends again, but I'm not going to force you to pull your head out and start acting like one.

The last thing I'm going to say is that you'd better start treating Hermione decently, because this whole thing has really upset her.

I'll see you at Bill and Fleur's wedding on the 21st.

Ron.

Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise. He certainly hadn't been expecting that. Despite the tone of the letter, Harry couldn't help but smile, but then his face fell again. The fact that Ron seemed prepared to cut ties was what caused Harry to make up his mind.

All this time, he had thought his obstinacy and his anger at them had been the only thing between them being friends again, but if it turned out that Ron was fed up with him acting like a prat and wouldn't be there if Harry did decide he needed them, then it was a different matter all together. All this time, he had thought they would always be there, but if they weren't... A trickle of worry began to pool in his chest and he wondered if this is how Ron and Hermione had felt all this time.

Harry decided then and there that this had gone on long enough.

Yes, they had lied to him, but they had been doing it for him, and in the end, could he really stay mad at them for that? It was time to grow up and let go of his anger.

oOo

The second day Harry was there was a weekend, and Aislinn convinced Niall to let her take the truck and drive Harry to Galway to show him around. It wasn't a long drive and they spent it pleasantly, Aislinn telling him about growing up on the farm and how she went to school in Galway, staying there during the week and coming home on weekends and holidays.

They parked the car in a commercial area near Aislinn's school and walked down the long street, Aislinn pointing out sights as they went.

They stopped for lunch and then Aislinn suggested that they see a movie. It had been years since Harry had seen a movie. He had been allowed to go once with the Dursley's before he had started Hogwarts, but since then he had hardly even watched television.

Aislinn laughed at his eagerness and they bought tickets for an action movie that she had heard was good.

They were heading back to the car when Harry stopped short at the sight of an oddly dressed man. Well, not odd to Harry, but he was sure to the muggles on the street he was odd, dressed as he was in flowing blue robes and carrying matching hat in his hands.

Aislinn gave an amused smile. "It isn't rare to see some oddly dressed people now and then around here. I think there must be some sort of club or something around here."

Harry nodded and they continued on, but he made a note of the building he had seen the wizard go into. If there was a Floo there, that would help him a lot in getting back to England for Bill and Fleur's wedding.

oOo

That night, he thanked the stars that he had seen the wizard; he was definitely going to need a Floo.

He had been working on his Transfiguration homework when an owl had swooped through the barn window and landed with a screech, waddled over and nipped his arm.

“Ouch! Alright, I saw you!” Harry had plucked the letter from the owl, who had taken off immediately.

Potter, I will be calling on you next Saturday afternoon at four o’clock for a brief lesson.

SS

Harry scowled at the brief message. He should have expected that Snape would not let him get behind in his practice of Legilimency.

He would have to talk to Niall about going in to Galway again next weekend.

Tucking the letter away, he pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment and a quill and ink, and began scrawling a letter to Dudley about how he was doing. He made sure not to mention where he was, just writing vague remarks about how he was enjoying himself and hoped Dudley was well.

It felt a bit strange writing to Dudley, and he wondered how his aunt and uncle would react when they found that he and Dudley were corresponding. He added an extra bit at the end, telling Dudley that if his parents asked, he should tell them that Harry was just sending Hedwig every now and then to make it look like he was still at Privet Drive, so no one would come and check.

It was only when he had sent the letter off with Hedwig that he realised he had forgotten to tell Dudley he would be back there next week, which had been the whole point of the letter.

“I guesss my relativesss are going to get an unpleasssant sssurprissse, Salzzz,” he said to Salazar, who was coiled up at the end of Harry’s bed.



Harry walked over to his trunk to return the parchment and quill. He was just closing the lid when he spotted something he had forgotten he had; the potions textbook he had taken from the dungeons when he had forgotten his own.

He had been meaning to have a look through it, so he pulled it out and took it back to his bed. Flipping open the cover, he found that someone had written 'This is the Property of The Half-Blood Prince.' on the inside cover.

Wondering who on earth that was, Harry turned the next few pages looking for another name, but couldn't find one.

The book was filled with the previous owner's spiky scrawl. Not one of the pages was unmarked.

Most of the scribbles were corrections or improvements to potions, but there were a few things written in the margins that looked like spells of the boy's own invention.

The first one he found was at the bottom of a page detailing the Pepper-up Potion.

The untidy words read Levicorpus (n-vbl). Harry assumed that meant non-verbal, and he wondered what the spell did.

He was itching to try it, but he couldn't use his wand or the Ministry would know where he was.

After a while, he put aside the book and practiced his wandless magic for a while. He was getting pretty good at summoning now, able to do it most of the time with any object. He had found that it was harder to summon objects that were further away, and that he had to be actually looking at the object to summon it, though he supposed that with enough practice he would be able to summon objects that were out of his sight and from greater distances.

oOo

The evening before he was due to Floo back to London for his lesson with Snape, Harry was practicing his animagus transformation. He had transformed, and he somehow felt that he had nearly completed the change.

He was a lot higher off of the ground; his head was close to the rafters of the barn. He had no mirror to inspect the rest of his body, but he hardly needed it. He found he could twist his body easily around on itself, allowing him to look at himself from several different angles.

He was long and thin, and his arms were completely gone now. His legs still looked slightly human, but they were far more muscular and the clawed feet were even longer. To his surprise, he noticed a short tail, and he twisted further to inspect it. Unfortunately, he overbalanced, thudding to the floor because he was unable to use arms to catch himself.

His body was a deep emerald green, sinewy and strong, and though it felt wrong, it was not especially difficult to pull himself up.

Suddenly he heard the crunch of boots on gravel, and he could tell that it was Niall walking towards the barn from the house. His hearing must be much more acute now; there was no way he should have been able to hear that.

He noticed too, that his sense of smell was exceptional.

He quickly transformed to his normal state, and then walked out of the barn to greet Niall.

"Harry, I was just checking that you were all set for tomorrow."

Harry nodded. "Is it still alright for you to drop me off?"

"Of course, and I'll pick you up on Sunday."

Harry returned to the loft of the barn just as yet another owl soared through the window. Reading the letter, he was forced to re-evaluate his planned trip back to London.

Harry received another letter the next day, this time from Dumbledore.

Dear Harry,

It has come to my attention that you have left the safety of your relative's house.

It is of the utmost importance that you contact someone from the Order at once, so that we can collect you.

It is most unsafe for you to be alone at this time.

A.D.

Harry scowled in displeasure. He had thought it would be a while before anyone noticed he was missing, certainly more than three days, but clearly whoever had been watching the house was more observant than he had given them credit for.

He wrote a short reply, saying that he was alright and that he was fine where he was. They might know he wasn't at Privet Drive, but they didn't need to know where he was staying. If he told them, he had no doubt they would turn up and take him to Grimmauld Place for the rest of the holidays.

HisHis

oOo

Harry spent the next week and a bit getting to know the farm and the McKenna family better by day and reading through his books at night. He had received several more owls from members of the Order, insisting they tell them where he was, but he simply refused, merely replying that he was fine and preferred to be left alone and that he would see them at the wedding.

He had also written an apology to Snape for missing their planned lesson, and received an acerbic reply in return.

oOo

Early in the morning of the 21st, Niall dropped Harry and his trunk off in Galway and he headed to the building that he had seen the wizard go into. As he got closer, he noticed that like the Leaky Cauldron, the eyes of passers-by skipped from the building on one side to the one on the other side, not seeing the one in between. On one side there was a library and Harry ducked in to it and went into the toilet. Locking himself in a cubicle, he pulled out one of the vials of Polyjuice potion he had bought from the apothecary when he had sold the basilisk parts. Uncorking it, he added a hair he had kept safe after he had plucked it off the band of Niall's hat when he took it off at lunch.

The potion bubbled and turned a cheery red colour. Harry downed half of it and felt his body begin to change. Niall was slightly taller than Harry, and more bulky, but Dudley's clothes fitted fine.

He left the library and headed next door, stuffing his glasses into his pocket.

He entered the building that no one else could see. It turned out not to be a building at all. Instead, after stepping through the door, he found himself in a wide alleyway, and when he looked back he could see the muggle street as if there were no wall there at all.

He headed into the nearest shop. It was a robe shop, and he approached the front counter. The attendant looked up with a smile. "How can I help you, sir?"

"I was wondering if there were any public Floos around here?"

The attendant nodded. "Just up the alley there's a transport office you can Floo from."

Harry thanked the woman and headed to the building she had described. He didn't go inside, however. He had a half hour before the half dose of polyjuice wore off, and he didn't want to turn up at the Weasley's looking like a complete stranger.

He walked up the wide thoroughfare, looking in the windows of various shops he passed. The buildings seemed older than the ones in Diagon alley, but they were all well kept up. The shops themselves seemed to be much the same as the ones he was used to seeing; the occasional apothecary, cafes, a wizarding wear shop that sold robes and hats, stationary shops.

After a quarter of an hour, he thought he had better start heading back. He didn't want his appearance to change in the middle of the street; that would certainly attract attention. He didn't think anyone here would recognise him, but he didn't want to risk it either.

He reached the transport office and went inside, heading straight for the row of fireplaces. Green flames were burning constantly in each grate and there was a small line of people waiting in front of each one. He chose the one with the shortest line, and only had to wait a few minutes before it was his turn. He stepped into the emerald flames and called clearly, "The Burrow, Otter Street Catchpole." He closed his eyes tightly against the bits of flying ash, but he could do nothing about the bits that went up his nose. He stopped spinning and felt himself fall forward. He stumbled dizzily, swaying from side to side until he got his balance back.

Harry had seen some people who stepped out as if they were simply walking through a doorway, but he had no idea how they could maintain their sense of equilibrium.

When he had done so, he found that several wands were trained on him. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Lupin and Tonks were standing around him, their wands pointed at his chest.

"Who are you?" snarled Lupin, a tone in his voice that Harry had never had directed at him before.

"It's me, Harry."

"Harry?" Lupin frowned, but didn't lower his wand. The other three exchanged quick looks.

“Wh-” began Tonks, but at that moment, Harry felt the polyjuice begin to wear off.

After a few groans of pain, Harry straightened up, returned to his normal appearance. He grinned. “Polyjuice. Sorry, I didn’t mean to surprise you all like that.”

A fuzzy figure moved towards him and Harry found himself enveloped in a tight hug by Mrs. Weasley.

“Oh, Harry! We’re so glad you’re safe! Running off like that was such a silly thing to do!”

“I’m fine, Mrs. Weasley,” he insisted, touched by the depth of her concern for him.

Let’s look at you,” she said, stepping back and holding him by the shoulders. “You do look alright, and you’ve grown since last time we saw you,” she said, a tear appearing in her eye.

“Let Harry go, Molly. He’s just fine,” said Arthur Weasley, stepping forward. “Hello Harry.”

Harry returned his smile. “Hello Mr. Weasley.”

So where have you been, Harry?” asked Tonks, her expression becoming more serious.

Harry sighed. “I’ve been safe. It doesn’t matter where.”

Lupin frowned. “Why won’t you tell us, Harry?”

“Because I know if I do, I won’t be able to go back there.”

Remus’ eyebrows rose. “And you’re intending to, aren’t you?”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe. It’s a nice place. I’ve been enjoying it.”

Just then, Dumbledore stepped into the kitchen, followed by Snape. They stopped short at the sight of Harry, and he noticed a look of

relief pass over both their faces, though it was extremely brief on Snape's.

"Harry, my boy. I must say it is an immense relief to see you well. Where have you been?"

"We've been trying to get that out of him, Albus, but he seems quite reluctant to tell us," stated Tonks.

"Is that so?" mused Dumbledore, a small smile on his lips as he gazed at Harry. "You've cause quite a stir. I am interested to know how it is you left without anyone realising.

Harry shrugged again. "I just went out under my invisibility cloak." He thought it seemed a pretty logical conclusion that they would have already come to. "It wasn't difficult."

"But as usual," murmured Snape, who seemed to be back in good health, "you neglected to think about how your actions would affect others."

"Well I didn't think you would find out I'd left so quickly. I didn't want people to worry."

"And what about your family?" enquired Snape in a silky voice.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm sure you've realised by now that they were perfectly happy to see me go!" he replied hotly.

"Idiot boy! Y-"

"Severus, that is enough," cut in Dumbledore sharply.

Harry looked from one to the other, a frown forming on his face.

"I assure you that your family are perfectly fine," said Dumbledore. "Though they did have a bit of a scare."

"What do you mean?" asked Harry slowly, a feeling of dread rising in him.

“When you left, when you no longer called Privet Drive home, the wards put in place to protect you fell.”

Harry sank into his chair, the heavy weight of guilt settling on him. He had been so relieved and happy to have left Privet Drive that he hadn’t even considered the wards around the house.

And that brief stab of disappointment and frustration he had felt soon after he had left – that must have been Voldemort finding out he was not at Privet Drive.

“I instantly felt the wards fall, but when that much magic comes crashing down, other people are bound to notice as well, especially if they are monitoring the house, which Voldemort undoubtedly was.”

“What happened?” asked Harry, his voice cracking with worry.

“Members of the Order apparated immediately to the area, arriving shortly before a large group of Death Eaters. We managed to hold them off and there were no casualties. Your relatives have been moved to a safe location until we can establish new wards and convince them to return to the house.”

Dumbledore gave a small smile. “I admit, at this time they are most hesitant about doing so.”

Harry didn’t reply, instead letting his head fall into his hands.

Mrs. Weasley took pity on him and pulled him against her side, smoothing down his hair.

“Don’t worry dear, you didn’t know. No one blames you.” She continued, talking loudly over Snape’s snort. “Everyone is safe, including you, and that is what matters.”

“Don’t coddle the boy, Molly. He deserves whatever guilt he feels.” Harry could imagine the sneer that was being directed at him.



Mrs. Weasley tutted at Snape's comment, but Harry had to admit he actually agreed with Snape.

There was silence in the kitchen until Mrs. Weasley spoke. "Why don't you go upstairs and put your trunk away? Ron and Hermione are up in Ron's room."

Harry nodded numbly and began to drag his trunk up, when it suddenly lifted up into the air with a flick of Dumbledore's wand.

Harry trudged up the stairs with it floating behind him, and finally came to the landing that Ron's bedroom came off.

Steeling himself, he knocked and pushed the door open.

"Harry!" exclaimed Hermione, jumping up from the bed.

"Hey guys."

Ron gave a nod, an unsure expression on his face.

Harry ran a hand through the hair, unsure of exactly what to say and all too aware of the sudden tension in the room.

He finally settled for "Still backing the Cannons, I see." Ron's room was more orange than ever, walls ceiling and bed covered in posters and banners and all manner of souvenirs.

"So you've decided to be civil again, have you?" asked Ron, a somewhat stony expression on his face.

Harry heaved an exaggerated sigh, determined not to get annoyed. "I suppose I have, yes."

"So what made you change your mind?" asked Ron in a slightly gruff tone.

Harry's lips quirked. "Well I got a letter from you, Ron, about Hermione, and I got a letter from Hermione about Ron."

Ron grinned sheepishly at Hermione, who was beaming at Ron.

“And you both seemed to think I’ve been out of line.”

Ron started to speak, but Harry held up his hand. “No, you’re probably right. I think I deserved to be angry about what you did, but I shouldn’t have stayed angry for so long. I was just sick of every aspect of my life being controlled. I thought I could at least trust that my two best friends would tell me the truth.”

“We are sorry, Harry. You have to believe that!” insisted Hermione.

“I do, and I want you both to know that I am as well. I’ve missed you guys.”

Hermione threw herself at him, sobbing into his shoulder. He patted her back awkwardly, looking to Ron for help, but the redhead just shrugged and gave Harry a look that clearly said, ‘you deserve it.’

Hermione finally pulled away and wiped at her eyes, giving an embarrassed smile.

Harry turned to Ron and held out his hand. “Friends?”

Ron grinned and clasped Harry’s hand. “No doubt about it.”

After that, Ron filled Harry in on everything that had been going on at the Burrow over the past two weeks.

Harry was quite happy he hadn’t been there by the end of Ron’s story; apparently it had been quite hectic with all the preparation for the wedding.

Mrs. Weasley called them down at ten to help set up chairs in the yard. It didn’t take very long, as all the Weasley children were there to help, along with Lupin and Tonks.

As they laid out the last few chairs, Harry saw Dumbledore, Snape and Moody talking quietly near the orchard.

A few minutes later, the three began walking back to the house and Harry broke off from the Weasleys to catch up with them.

“Professor Snape!”

The Potions Master stopped with a scowl, waiting for Harry. “Yes?”

“I was just thinking, since I missed my lesson the other day, and since we’re both here, maybe we could do it sometime today.”

Snape stared at him with piercing eyes for a moment. “Very well. Come along.” Snape turned and swept away.

“What, now?”

Snape stopped and turned back, an eyebrow raised. “Do you have something more pressing to be doing at the moment?”

“I suppose not,” mumbled Harry, and followed Snape into Mr. Weasley’s office, which was about the only room in the house not occupied.

They practiced for about an hour before Snape threw Harry out and glanced up at the clock on the wall. “I suppose we must make an appearance at this infernal wedding,” he muttered, looking thoroughly put out by the idea.

Unlike Snape, Harry was only too happy to go and talk to people. He hadn’t seen Lupin in a while, and he wanted to talk to Ron and Hermione.

Snape disappeared somewhere, and Harry found Remus in the kitchen talking quietly with Tonks. He felt a bit guilty about how he had treated her, but only a bit. She had only been doing her job.

“Harry!” Tonks smiled when she saw him. She certainly didn’t seem to be holding any grudges over his behaviour.

Harry joined in their conversation for a while before an excited look suddenly came over Tonks' face and she turned to Remus. "We haven't told him the good news!"

The same look dawned on Remus' face and he smiled widely.

"What news?" asked Harry, confused.

Suddenly, Tonks stuck her hand in front of Harry's face, wiggling her fingers. Harry saw a jewel-studded ring glittering on her ring finger and his jaw dropped. "You got married!?"

He looked to Lupin. "You two got married!?"

Remus chuckled. "I'm sorry you couldn't be there, Harry. It all happened very quickly. In fact, it was just the two of us."

Harry shook his head in amazement. He certainly hadn't seen this coming. "Congratulations," he said, genuinely happy for them both.

...

Bill and Fleur's wedding was nice. Harry had never been to one before, and he found he enjoyed it, even though he had to use polyjuice to disguise himself. He was happy to do it however; he didn't want word to get out that he was here in case Voldemort decided to attack the Burrow.

After the ceremony, everyone danced and ate until early into the morning.

oOo

One night after he'd been at the Weasley's about a week, Harry was having trouble sleeping, and after a while he got up, closing the door quietly behind him. He stayed a moment with his ear pressed to the door to make sure Ron's snores didn't stop, and then went downstairs and out into the back yard.

The night was cool as he walked to the treed area that ran along the edge of the Weasley's property, and dark clouds hung in the sky, making everything around him difficult to see.

Perfect for him.

Once he was in the cover of the trees, he found a nice open space and sat against a tree for a few minutes, to ensure no one had followed him out of the house.

After a while of sitting in the peaceful silence, Harry was assured no one had come out after him and he stood, moving to the middle of the clearing. It was even darker under the trees, but as soon as he transformed, the world opened up to him.

His sight returned, and he could see tiny details with great clarity. His sense of smell and hearing were amazing as well; he could hear small animals scittering through the trees, and smell many strange smells on the wind.

His attention turned to his body, looking for any new transformations, and he was surprised to notice muscles moving that he had never really felt before. He twisted slightly to look at his back. There, hanging on his back and fluttering slightly when he moved, were two small but definite wings.

His heart raced at the sight of them. They were too small to be of any use at the moment, but if they continued to grow, he would be able to fly! The thought sent excitement racing through him.

When they'd learned about animagi in transfiguration, their textbook had said that magical creatures were extremely rare. Having grown up as a muggle, he didn't really know that many magical creatures, except the ones they had learned about in Hagrid's class. Given that he had no idea what he was however, he was beginning to suspect that he, like Malfoy, had a magical form.

What confused him more however, was the fact that Malfoy was a dragon, and a dragon was the closest thing Harry could think of to describe himself.

Given the statistics however, he didn't see how they could possibly be the same.

After a while, Harry returned to his human form and walked back to the house, where he was finally able to fall asleep.

oOo

The next morning, Harry and Ron came down to breakfast to find Dumbledore chatting with Hermione, Ginny and Mrs. Weasley.

Everyone exchanged good mornings, and Harry and Ron found full plates of food pushed in front of them.

"I don't know how you boys sleep so much," commented Mrs. Weasley as she sat back down. Ron gave a shrug in reply, scoffing his food down and receiving disgusted looks from Hermione and Ginny.

...

Harry was just finished the food when Dumbledore stood up to leave, and turned to address Harry.

"Harry, I shall be coming to collect you on the evening of the first."

Harry looked up with a frown. "Why?"

"The Order has agreed it would be safer to spend the rest of your holidays at Grimmauld Place.

Harry pursed his lips, receiving a sympathetic look from Ron.

Dumbledore continued, sensing Harry's reluctance at the idea. "I think you'll actually find it quite pleasant. It has been fully cleaned out now, and Remus is living there; I'm sure you'd like to see him. He is definitely looking forward to seeing you."

Harry did brighten at that thought, and it must have shown on his face.

"I also think Molly may be convinced to send her children away a few days earlier."

Mrs. Weasley smiled. "Of course, that sounds like a wonderful idea."

oOo

On the night of Harry's birthday, he was sitting with Ron and Hermione in Ron's bedroom.

"I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Yeah, for Grimmauld Place. We were there when Dumbledore told you, remember?" replied Ron, pulling out an old Quidditch Magazine with a picture of the Chudley Cannons on the front.

"No, I mean I'm leaving on my own. I don't want to go to Grimmauld Place, so I'm going somewhere else."

Hermione bit her lip. "Are you sure that's a good idea, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "It's what I want to do."

"It isn't really safe though, is it? What if-"

Harry cut her off before she could launch into a lecture. "Look Hermione, I've haven't been at Privet Drive all holidays, and nothing's happened to me so far. I'll be fine."

"So that's what everyone was so worried about!" said Ron loudly, putting down the magazine and leaning forward. "Where were you then?"

Harry smiled. "Ireland, but you can't tell anyone, alright?"

"Ireland!" squeaked Hermione.

Ron grinned back. "Lips are sealed, mate."

Harry turned seriously to Hermione, whose lips were pursed. "Hermione?"

"Fine!" she huffed, though he could tell she thought it was anything but.

oOo

The next afternoon, Harry had everything packed. He had said discreet goodbyes to the Weasley children, knowing they wouldn't let on where he was going.

He had said goodbye to Mr. Weasley that morning before he left for work, and thanked Mrs. Weasley for having him after lunch.

Then, around four, he and Ron carried his trunk downstairs to the empty kitchen and Harry gave a tearful and worried Hermione a hug. "I'll be fine, really. There's absolutely nothing to worry about."

"So you've said," she muttered as he pulled away. Ron rolled his eyes and slapped Harry on the back. "Seeya, mate. Have fun."

Harry grinned. "I will."

Harry threw some Floo Powder into the fireplace and stepped into the emerald flames.

"Diagon Alley!"

oOo

The Office for the Department of Transport in Diagon Alley was next to empty when he walked in at a quarter to five that afternoon. His trunk was shrunk and sitting in a deep pocket, with his wand and invisibility cloak on top of it.

There was a middle-aged man standing behind the counter, and Harry approached.



“Hello, I’ve come to get my Apparition Licence,” he said, his voice ringing loudly in the empty room.

The man turned and walked around the desk. “Right this way, please.”

Harry followed the man around the counter and into a large, empty room. No sooner had they arrived, then a loud pop sounded in the room and a wizard appeared in a far corner.

“This is Wendell Patrick, he’ll be your instructor for today.”

Harry nodded to the friendly looking man, who he recognised from one of the practice sessions they had had in school.

“Now the process is quite simple,” began the man immediately. “I shall conjure several hoops on the floor, and as I do you shall apparate to them. As you can see, the maximum distance you will be apparating today is no more than twenty metres, so I must stress that a licence to apparate does not mean you should immediately go out apparating all over the country, because you’ll likely splinch yourself.”

Harry shuddered at the thought, recalling the splinchings that had taken place during their practice sessions at Hogwarts.

“If you splinch yourself today, that is grounds to not receive a licence.”

He nodded, and the man clapped his hands together in enthusiasm. “Right then, first one.” He flicked his wand, and a purple hoop appeared about five metres away.

Harry concentrated, turned on the spot, and felt a squeezing sensation. When he opened his eyes, he found he was standing slightly to the left of the hoop. He frowned, wondering how this would affect him.

“Not to worry, not to worry. Try again.”

Another hoop appeared, and this time when he apparated, he found himself smack-bang in the middle of the hoop.

Wendell nodded in approval and conjured a hoop that was a little further away. This went on for a good half an hour, and to Harry's relief, he performed well. Finally, they were finished.

"Well done, well done."

"That's it?" asked Harry.

Wendell nodded happily. "If you just go through to the front desk and hand them this slip, they'll present you with your licence. Congratulations, young man."

Harry grinned. "Thanks."

Harry returned to the front room and approached the front desk again, placing the blue slip onto the counter.

The man took it without a word and pulled out a small card. "Name?" he asked in an indifferent voice, not even bothering to look up.

"Harry Potter."

The man's head whipped up, his eyes roving Harry's face and forehead carefully. After several moments, his gaze turned to the small card and he printed Harry's name carefully onto the line. "Fill out these, please."

Harry took the two sheets of parchment and began to fill out his detail. There wasn't much, and he was done in a few minutes.

The man took the parchment back and performed a spell which duplicated the small card, and handed one back to Harry. The other went into a filing cabinet, along with the forms.

"And you're all set, Mr. Potter."

"Great. Thanks."

“Have a nice evening.”

Harry nodded. “You too.”

Harry strolled out of the office for the Department of Transport, feeling very good about himself. Being able to apparate would make things a lot easier.

Deciding to go for a celebratory ice cream, Harry headed down the street, hoping the shop he wanted wasn't closed.

He was nearing Florean Fortescue's when the pop of apparition filled the air. Over a dozen Death Eaters had appeared in the Alley, their wands raised.

It was late in the day now, and the street was almost empty except for the black robed figures that were scattering, racing off in all directions.

Harry drew his wand and ducked around a corner, just in time.

A Death Eater raced past him, and Harry crept out behind him once he had passed.

Harry stopped and aimed his wand. The spell left his wand, hitting the Death Eater square in the back and sending him crashing to the ground.

Harry had just ducked back into the shadows when another Death Eater sped past, having seen his fallen comrade from the main alley. He reached the man and stopped to check for a pulse, before looking around and speeding off again. Harry once again aimed his wand. A spell was on his lips when he was hit from behind, his wand ripping from his hand and landing on the other side of the Alley. He sprinted towards it, but another spell threw him backwards. He hit the brick wall with a thud, and the alley went out of focus for a few moments.

When his vision returned to normal, a masked figure had reached him.

Harry breathed heavily, the back of his head aching where it had hit the wall. The Death Eater stood over him, also breathing heavily, pointing his wand at Harry.

He was going to summon his wand, but he stopped when he realised the Death Eater was staring off down the alley at the retreating back of the first Death Eater. When he had disappeared around a corner, the man standing over him looked down at Harry.

“Stup-“ The Death Eater halted. Several moments passed as the masked Death Eater stared down at him, glancing up and down the lane.

Harry looked at his options. He had no wand, another wand trained on him, and nowhere really to run that would give him any cover. He glared up at the attacker, trying to work out where his wand had flown so he could summon it. “What are you waiting for?”

To Harry’s surprise, the wand dropped and the black-cloaked figure took an abrupt step back.

“Get out of here.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open in recognition and disbelief as the Death Eater turned and began to walk quickly away.

“...Malfoy?”

Harry got to his feet as the Death Eater halted and spun around.

He tensed as the boy marched back. With a strangled yell, Malfoy punched Harry right across the jaw, sending him spinning to the ground.

Leaning down and sticking his face inches from Harry’s, Malfoy hissed, “If I live to regret this Potter, I’ll make sure you do too.”

Harry spat a mouthful of blood to the ground as Malfoy turned again and hurried down the lane.

Harry scanned the ground and found his wand quickly, summoned it to him, and apparated.

...

He made his way up the dark lane that ran alongside the McKenna's farm. He had no idea how he had been found. And the Death Eaters must have been there for him, because there was no sense attacking the alley at the end of the day when it was practically empty, and they had clearly been looking for someone.

Rather than go into the house, Harry headed straight to the barn and unshrunk his trunk, rifling through it for a shirt that wasn't stained with his blood. He washed off his face and inspected his lip in the mirror. It was split, but not bleeding anymore. He touched it and winced; it was tender.

A great sense of shock and disappointment had filled him when he recognised Malfoy's voice. He had become a Death Eater after all.

Harry supposed that some part of him had known all along that it would happen, but a greater part of him had hoped that Malfoy had listened to Harry's arguments against following that path.

Sometimes when they had been in the chamber, in silent companionship, studying, duelling or practicing their animagus transformations, it had been hard for Harry to associate him with the Draco Malfoy that most people saw, with the person Draco Malfoy who was now a Death Eater.

But then again, Malfoy had let Harry go. Reluctantly, yes, but he had done it. This fact gave Harry some small measure of hope. Perhaps there was hope for the Slytherin yet.

oOo

The next evening after a hard day of moving cattle around and digging a drainage trench, Harry was relaxing on his bed when a

screech owl soared through the window, dropping a short scroll on the wooden floor.

Harry's muscles protested as he leaned down and picked it up, pulling away the string that kept it rolled up.

You are due for a lesson this weekend. I fully expect you in my presence at 6:00 on Saturday night.

SS

As luck would have it, the McKennas had been invited to a gathering at a friend's house on the night Harry was scheduled to be at Grimmauld Place for his Legilimency lesson. He had been invited to go with them, but he elected to remain behind at the farm, saying it would be a good chance for him to get some work done.

"They're this really old couple," said Aislinn, wrinkling her nose. "Though I suppose there will probably be someone my age there."

They were sitting in the barn while Aislinn's parents got ready to go out.

"Well I won't be very good company. I'll be spending all afternoon on assignments, unfortunately."

Aislinn sighed and leaned back in her chair. "Wouldn't you rather come with us?"

Harry gave her a rueful look. "Yeah, I would, but if I don't get started on my assignments, they'll never get done."

"I think it's weird having assignments over the holidays. We never get any. Two months of blissful, assignment-free relaxation!"

The car horn sounded then, and Aislinn reluctantly stood up. "Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

Harry smiled and returned her half-hearted wave. "Have fun."

She turned around and pulled a face at him, and then disappeared down the stairs.

As soon as the McKenna's car was bumping off down the track, Harry left. He slipped Salz into a pocket and then apparated to the wizarding alley in Galway, then flooed to the Leaky Cauldron. From there, he apparated again, this time to the front steps of Grimmauld Place. It would have been too far for him to apparate all the way from the McKenna's farm back to England.

He knocked, and only had to wait a few moments before the door was opened. As soon as it was, Mrs. Black's ear-splitting shrieks could be heard.

"Shut up, witch!" hissed Snape, before turning his glare on Harry. "Get inside, Potter. What are you waiting for?"

Harry stepped past the Potions Master into the dark, familiar house.

He stood by while Snape wrestled the curtains shut, and then followed him into the kitchen.

"The Order is not happy with you, Potter."

Harry frowned at the abrupt statement.

"The Order isn't or Dumbledore isn't?"

"You have caused the entire Order a great deal of worry, Potter. Disappearing without notice – twice – has put us out a great deal."

"Well the second time shouldn't have been so unexpected," muttered Harry, causing Snape to scowl.

"Do you not understand the danger you are in?"

Harry pursed his lips. "Of course I understand, but I'm not a child. I have a right to make my own decisions."

“That is debateable, given that you are clearly unable to think through the consequences of your actions.”

Harry clenched his jaw, glaring at Snape as they stared each other down from opposite sides of the room.

After a minute, Snape indicated for Harry to sit, and he did so as Snape lowered himself into a chair on the opposite side of the table.

They had just sat down when the door opened and one of the last people Harry had ever expected to see in a wizarding house stepped into the kitchen.

Her mouth formed into an ‘o’ of surprise when she saw Harry.

“Petunia,” sneered Snape.

“Severus,” she replied stiffly. “Harry.”

“Aunt Petunia! What are you doing here?”

She sniffed daintily, moving over to the kettle. “We’ve nowhere else to stay that is safe. Some of your lot turned up and destroyed the house!”

“An embellishment on fact,” muttered Snape to Harry as she filled the kettle up. “The house is perfectly fine, and your relatives completely unharmed. The fight took place in the street and the front garden.”

“I didn’t realise when Dumbledore said they were somewhere safe that he meant here.” Harry scowled. “This is Sirius’ house.”

“Was,” replied Snape smartly, quirking his lip in a small smirk, and Harry felt his face flood with colour.

“Don’t t-”

“I simply meant that it now belongs to the werewolf-” Snape paused when Aunt Petunia flinched and dropped her teacup, waving his wand to repair it. “-and he can bring whoever he wants into the house.



If he wishes to keep your relatives safe, that is none of your business. Though one would think you would be grateful to Lupin."

They sat silently at the table until Aunt Petunia had finished making her tea. Once done, she hastily left the kitchen, and Harry heard her going up the stairs.

"Someone still should have told me they were here."

"You did not ask, and you have been conspicuously absent, a fact which no one who might have been in a position to tell you could help."

"Have you met my Aunt before?" asked Harry abruptly, and a surprised expression appeared on Snape's face.

"What makes you ask?"

"She asked me about you, when I got back to Privet Drive after the holidays. She knew your name. And she addressed you by name just now. That doesn't seem like her, considering you're a wizard."

Snape waved Harry's observation aside. "Perhaps the Headmaster told her when he collected the three of us from Privet Drive after you apparated us there. Besides that, I have been here regularly since they arrived and it is generally considered good manners to introduce oneself to guests with whom one is sharing living quarters."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "That doesn't seem likely to me."

Snape pursed his lips in apparent annoyance. "Then perhaps she can read minds, Potter. Though that too, sounds unlikely. We shall begin the lesson now."

Harry however, had something else he wanted to talk about. "I saw Malfoy the other day."

Snape's eyes flickered briefly away before returning to Harry's, and a frown appeared on his face.

"I was in Diagon Alley and-"

"Ah, yes. Your little escapade did not go unnoticed."

"It wasn't an escapade, Professor. I went to get my apparition licence."

"Be that as it may, you were not careful enough."

"I've got no idea how they found me," stressed Harry.

"The Dark Lord has followers everywhere, Potter. All it needed was for one of them to see you and the Dark Lord would know within minutes where you were."

"It's not exactly something I could help. I had to look like myself if I wanted to get my licence. Besides!" he said louder, as Snape began to talk. "This isn't the point. I was telling you about Malfoy. He was one of-"

"Quiet!" hissed Snape. "Do you think we are not aware of this?"

"It's your fault!" Harry blurted out before he could stop himself, and he immediately wished he could take it back, because he knew it was a completely unfounded and unfair accusation.

Snape's nostrils flared. "And how did you come to that conclusion, may I ask?"

"You should have talked to him. He looks up to you, and you betrayed everything he's always believed about you."

"Mr. Malfoy was on his way to becoming a Death Eater long before I was revealed as a spy. How dare you suggest that it is my fault!"

"You could have convinced him not to. You could have told him that he would be protected."

"It is time to begin the lesson, Mr. Potter."

“|-”

“I said it is time to begin the lesson.” yelled Snape, slamming a fist down on the scrubbed wooden table. “This discussion is over. Clear your mind!”

Harry sat back and cleared his mind, regretting blaming Snape for what Malfoy had done. Snape’s face was contorted in anger, until he too cleared his mind, and his face became a blank mask. Even his eyes showed no signs of anger.

They began with Occlumency, and Snape was ruthless in his pursuit of Harry’s memories. Harry was very good at Occlumency now, but after a while his shield began to weaken under Snape’s assault.

He realised that Snape was searching for the place Harry had been staying, and he felt his shield growing weaker still. Instead of continuing to fight Snape, Harry gathered certain memories; the farm, the chamber, and put only them behind his shield.

He then projected memories of the Leaky Cauldron, remembering the time he had been there before his third year. He wasn’t sure this would work, but Snape was in a bad mood and he wasn’t going to stop until he thought he had what he wanted.

Harry let his memories leak out, and Snape sorted through them, quickly coming to the memories that Harry put forward. He was walking up the wooden stairs from the pub, Tom was unlocking the door and Harry was dragging his trunk into the dimly lit room. He was lying on the bed, looking in the mirror and smoothing down his hair, walking through the archway into Diagon Alley.

It worked. Harry kept his feeling of relief behind his shields as Snape retreated from his mind.

“The Leaky Cauldron, Potter?” he sneered. “That is where you think you are safe?”

Harry shrugged lightly. “I’ve been fine so far.”

Snape had a small frown on his face, but he said nothing more on the matter, and they went on to Legilimency.

Harry entered Snape's mind. Once again, he was standing in a dark place, with memories swirling out of reach. They were occluded by a thick oily substance that seemed to hang in the air and pooled around his feet.

He focussed on finding a memory he wanted, seeking images of Bill and Fleur's wedding. As soon as he did so, a great many images disappeared. The remaining memories grew closer, but Harry was also tugged, in multiple directions at once. He immediately fell over, sprawling in the viscous muck that Snape used as a shield. It was deeper and thicker than it had been at the Burrow, and he struggled to get to his feet.

By the time he had done so, he no longer had a hold on the memories he had been seeking. Struggling to keep his balance on the slippery floor, he decided to simply try sitting down.

He did so, and this time when he focussed on his own memories of the wedding, although he was tugged around, he did not lose his concentration.

There were too many memories to draw in just one, so he focussed more on the Bill and Fleur part of his memories. A few more memories dropped away, and Harry assumed they were from other weddings Snape had attended.

Deciding just to pick one of the remaining memories, Harry focussed on one and slowed it down. As it slowed, it moved closer and closer, and he found that the oily muck around him was draining away to be replaced by green grass. The sky was lightening, becoming bright blue.

In moments, he was standing in the back yard of the Burrow. He looked around at all the people laughing and dancing, and saw Snape talking with Dumbledore a few steps away. Suddenly, he realised there was black muck oozing up through the ground. Harry focussed on staying in the memory, and it retreated.

Satisfied that he had done alright, he decided to look for another memory, and his mind sprang instantly to Aunt Petunia. He had a feeling there was something Snape wasn't telling him about her, and he wanted to find out what it was.

No sooner had the thought sprung to his mind, then he was back in the darkness. He focussed on Aunt Petunia and most of the memories dropped away.

Suddenly the oily substance that washed around Harry's ankles was much deeper. Suddenly it was in his mouth and his nose and his eyes. He could not see, or breathe. He felt himself being dragged along by a great current, and then he was falling. It was as if he were washing down a plug hole, and suddenly he was sitting at the kitchen table, gasping for breath.

Strangely enough, he suddenly realised that he was fine; he didn't need to catch his breath at all. He stopped his heavy breathing, feeling a bit stupid.

Snape smirked. "It is all mental, Potter. You may have felt like you could not breathe, but in reality, it was only your mental self that was unable to. I might add that an image in your mind does not need to breathe. When you come across such obstacles, simply remember that it is all mental, and overcome it."

Harry nodded, massaging his temples and wondering if it was only coincidence that Snape had ended the lesson when Harry had been looking for memories of Aunt Petunia.

"That will do for tonight. You have made considerable improvement since leaving school, something I did not expect."

"I've been practicing those exercises."

Snape nodded, and Harry stood, stretching. He said good night and headed out.

Harry left the kitchen and was approaching the stairs on his way to the front door when Uncle Vernon appeared in the hall.

“What are you doing here, boy?” Uncle Vernon’s face purpled remarkably quickly when he caught sight of Harry.

“Uncle Vernon,” replied Harry tonelessly. “I had to come by and see one of my teachers.”

Uncle Vernon moved surprisingly quickly, pinning Harry against the wall with his arm.

“This is all your fault! I knew it was a mistake to take you in all those years ago, and now we’ve lost our home! Your freakishness has cost us too much this time. All this time we’ve put a roof over your ungrateful little head, and then you leave and as good as take it with you!”

Harry glared at his uncle. “Don’t make me use magic on you, Uncle Vernon.”

His uncle let out a mad laugh. “Magic? I know you aren’t allowed to do that outside of your freak school.”

“I am now. I’ve come of age. I can do what I want, and believe me, I do want to, Uncle Vernon.”

Uncle Vernon’s face paled slightly, and his grip loosened slightly.

“Mr. Dursley,” hissed a soft, but malice-filled voice from the shadows. “You will take your hands off of your nephew.”

Uncle Vernon looked around in surprise, releasing Harry at once and stepping back.

His uncle muttered something unintelligible, cast a nervous glance at Snape and hastened back up the stairs, the sound of a door slamming reaching Harry’s ears.

Harry nodded to Snape and moved quietly past the portrait of Sirius' mother to open the door. Stepping out into the cool night air, he apparated.

oOo

It was late when Harry arrived back at the farm, and he could see the McKenna's car was back. All the lights were off in their house, so he headed straight for the barn. Half way there, however, he changed his mind. He was feeling wide awake, despite the draining lesson.

Instead of going up to his loft, he walked out to an empty paddock about ten minutes walk from the barn. It was the one he had helped Niall fence off, and they hadn't yet moved any animals in there.

He looked around him. There was absolute silence, not even a breath of wind disturbed the peace. The sky was unbelievably clear and the moon cast a bright silver glow over the land, allowing him to see perfectly.

Taking a deep breath, Harry cleared his mind and transformed. The warm, tingling feeling spread all through him, from the top of his head to the bottom of his toes, and Harry knew that he had finally completed the transformation.

He was big, but given that he was a Quidditch player, being so high of the ground did not unsettle him. His human skin had been replaced with green scales the same colour his eyes had been, and his legs were muscular and strong, with feet that had long, black nails and a deadly spike on the heel.

He had a long tail, and he found he could walk on his feet, though only quite slowly. It was annoying, and he felt the desire to move faster. By some instinct, he lowered himself onto his scale stomach and began to push himself along with his back legs, his long body moving in a kind of snake-like motion.

After sliding around the field for a few minutes, he stopped and stood up.

Now it was time to test the final and best new body part: his wings.

Harry spread the huge, leathery wings and gave them an experimental flap. He could feel the wind from them, and he flapped them harder until he felt himself lift slightly off the ground.

With a feeling of elation, he flapped harder still, and finally he was in the air, supported by nothing but his own body and the air.

He flew up, up, up, getting further and further away from the ground. Inside he was grinning like a maniac, though he was fairly certain it didn't show on his face.

Harry had never felt so free. He twisted and turned in the air, higher above the ground than he had ever been.

The countryside was far beneath him, cloaked in silvery moonlight here and shadowy darkness there. He could make out amazing detail, things he wouldn't have been able to see with human eyes.

It was the early hours of the morning when Harry finally collapsed into bed, a huge smile on his face.

He didn't believe he was a dragon as well; the chances of him and Malfoy being the same magical creature were pretty much nonexistent, and he had never seen a dragon that didn't have arms. He was definitely reptilian, of that he was sure. He would have to wait until he got back to Hogwarts to do some research.

It was as Harry was falling asleep that he had a sudden thought. Snape had stopped the lesson when Harry had called on images of Aunt Petunia. But that was strange, because Snape was a far greater Occlumens than Harry was a Legilimens; he would have easily been able to stop Harry actually seeing any memories.

When Harry had focussed on Aunt Petunia, many memories had dropped away. But there had still been some there, and Snape had denied that he knew Aunt Petunia.



Perhaps what Snape had not wanted Harry to see was that he did have memories of her at all.

oOo

Voldemort held the wand to the girl's head, ignoring her pleas. "Why did you not review?" he hissed, his eyes flashing.

The girl looked up, her mouth dropping open. "I'm sorry! I- I-"

"No excuses!" he roared, and the girl cringed.

"I'll review!" she cried. "As many times as you want!"

Voldemort gave a satisfied smile. "Make sure you do," he threatened, before disappearing into thin air.

oOo

I didn't read through and check this chapter, so if there's any glaring errors, please let me know in a review : )

Chapter lengths will probably be back to the 4000-5000 words range next week, but I might occasionally throw in longer ones for those who want them.

Please review! (Or I'll have to set my minions on you). Next update will be sometime next week. I'm thinking that the next chapter will see Harry back at school.

Thanks to Vanessa riddle, nxkris, cyiusblack, ams71080, Jensindenial3516, Elyma, Forgotten Lake, swordbunny4486, La Mariane, Slytherin66, RockIII, fhippogriff, black-heart-green-eyes, JonathLee, Daisuke Shadow Kitsune

and

Blah: He didn't get money out of his vault because he didn't have his key. Thanks for reviewing.

kapuchino: Glad you like it. Thanks heaps for the review. : )

notime: hehe, well I appreciate you taking the time to review. I'm so glad you like it! Thanks for the encouraging review : )

Dreamweaver: Thanks for reviewing : )

## Back In Black's House

The next day, Harry was still feeling elated after finally completing his animagus transformation and actually flying.

He set to the tasks Niall gave him with eagerness, and the outdoor work made him feel even better. There was something about the physical work that made him feel more alive, and he thought that he was going to miss it once he returned to Hogwarts, where Quidditch practice and the occasional walk down to the lake or to Hagrid's hut was the extent of his physical activity.

He had always been too skinny, but all the work and heavy lifting he had done since arriving at Kreeside had made him stronger and built some light muscle that made him look healthy.

If he wanted to keep it when he got back to Hogwarts, he was going to have to do more than Quidditch.

After dinner that night, Harry was drying the dishes after Aislinn washed them, while her parents watched the news.

The last dish was washed and Aislinn pulled the plug, the water gurgling noisily down the drain.

Harry yawned and stretched. "I think I might turn in early tonight. I'll see you in the morning. Say goodnight to your parents for me?"

Aislinn nodded, and then gave a shy smile.

"What?" asked Harry.

To Harry's immense surprise, Aislinn stood up on tip toe and pecked Harry on the cheek. She turned a brilliant red as Harry stared down at her, his eyebrows raised.

"Goodnight!" she squeaked, and fled from the kitchen.

Harry felt his shock wear away, and a satisfied grin spread across his face. He chuckled happily and left the house, whistling on his way back to the barn.

\*\*\*

‘Well to I recall how you begged me to spare the life of that mudblood. You were only too happy to watch her husband and child burn, but her... her you wished spared. And now you are protecting her son.’

Harry awoke, the words whispering like an echo in his mind. He continued to remember that night in his dreams, small snatches of the conversation that had taken place collecting in his mind, piecing themselves together and making him wonder.

Who had they been speaking about? Did it even matter? For some reason, the question nagged at Harry, and he just wished he could remember all of the conversation.

oOo

Aislinn avoided him the next day, and Harry thought she might be a bit embarrassed about kissing him. He wasn't sure if he found that amusing or disconcerting.

He had found that he didn't mind her kissing him at all, in fact, he rather hoped she wanted to do it again.

After lunch, he went upstairs and knocked on the door of her room.

“Hey,” he said, when she opened the door.

“Harry! What are you doing up here?”

“I came to see you.” He stepped into the room, looking around with interest. They usually spent time in the barn, or around the farm, but he had never been in any rooms of the house except for the kitchen and the living room.

There was soft blue carpet on the floor, and the walls were painted a cream colour, except for the one which held the window, which was blue to match the carpet.

There was a cushioned window seat in the window, which was surrounded by lacy white curtains.

Aislinn moved over to it, and Harry sat down next to her, leaning back on his hands. "Where've you been all morning?"

Aislinn shrugged. "I've just been doing stuff around the house," she replied, picking at a loose thread in the cushion.

Before he got too nervous and convinced himself not to, Harry leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers.

She gasped into the kiss, but after a moment she responded, and Harry felt a mixture of joy and relief.

It was nothing like kissing Cho back in fifth year; that had been awkward and slightly odd. This was amazing. His lips seemed to move effortlessly against Aislinn's, and best of all, she wasn't crying.

Harry smiled as he pulled back, delighting in the blush that had spread across Aislinn's face. Aislinn smiled back shyly, biting her bottom lip, but she shifted closer to him and leaned towards him again.

He turned towards her more, bringing one hand up to curl in her hair, when footsteps sounded on the stairs, and he and Aislinn sprang apart, jumping up guiltily.

Niall appeared at the door, a pleasant look on his face. "Harry, Ana said you'd come up to say hello to Aislinn. Ready to get back to work?"

Harry smiled and nodded, then turned to Aislinn. "I'll see you at dinner."

She smiled back. "Bye Harry, bye daddy." She plonked down on the bed, picking up a book that was splayed open on the doona.

"Bye sweetie. Don't work too hard."

Aislinn grinned at her father. "I won't."

oOo

Harry,

You haven't written to me for weeks, and you told me you would. This place we're staying is terrible, but Mum and Dad refuse to go back home.

That old guy with the beard said you might be coming to stay soon, but that other guy that's always scowling said 'not likely.'

He's scary, that one, and he keeps telling all these lies, I think to scare mum and dad and me. He said that the man who owns the house is a werewolf, but he seems too nice to be one.

Mum and Dad won't let me out of their sight hardly, but they might if you were here.

Harry raised an eyebrow in amusement. Dudley's hints certainly weren't subtle.

Anyway, write back, because there's nothing to do here and I'm really bored.

Dudley.

Harry tossed his cousin's letter aside and sighed. He didn't fancy spending time in a house with Uncle Vernon, but Dudley had been relatively nice to him lately, and he could easily imagine how Dudley must feel in a house full of wizards and witches, especially a house that was as hectic as Grimmauld Place.

At any rate, Hermione and the Weasleys would be there for the last few days, and it would be good to see them before school went back. He needed to get his school things, after all.

Besides that, maybe it would give him some time to investigate whatever was going on between Snape and his Aunt.

His decision made, Harry turned to other things. He might write back to Dudley later, if he felt like it.

He pulled out the Half-Blood Prince's Potions text, and as usual, he ended up reading the scrawls in the margins instead of doing his essay.

He had put off trying any of the spells so far. He was of age now, and able to do magic, but he didn't know if it could be traced still if he used his wand, and he didn't want to risk it.

The wand movement for the Levicorpus spell was just a flick, so Harry flicked his hand a couple of times at the blanket on his bed. He truly wasn't expecting anything to happen; it had taken him ages to master accio and lumos, but after a few flicks of his wrist, the blanket jerked up into the air and hung there, motionless.

Harry shrugged. It seemed like a bit of a pointless spell, not much different to any other levitation spell. Of course, he was doing it wandlessly, so perhaps he wasn't doing it correctly. He tried three other spells he had found in the book, and wasn't surprised when nothing happened. He would have to wait until he got to Grimmauld Place, where he could try them with a wand.

There was a counter curse in the book, but he couldn't remember which page it was on, so he reached over and tugged the blanket down. It fell lifelessly to the bed.

oOo

It was the night before Harry was due to return to England, and he felt that the last three weeks had gone far too fast.

"I'll miss you," whispered Aislinn, leaning her head against his shoulder. Harry slipped his arm around her and pulled her closer.

"I'll write to you. My owl, Hedwig, is a post owl."

Aislinn looked up with a disbelieving expression. "A post owl? I've never heard of those before. Pigeons, yes, but not owls."

"She's specially trained, and she's very smart."

Aislinn sat up, looking over at Hedwig who was asleep next to her cage. "But how will she know who to bring the letter to?"

Harry shrugged. "She's just a smart owl, and she'll hang around if you tell her to, so you can use her to write back to me."

Aislinn settled back against his side, looking happier.

"Do you have a photo I can take?" asked Harry, blushing lightly when she smirked at him.

"And what do you want a photo for?"

"I don't want to forget what you look like," he teased, leaning over to press his lips against hers.

"Hm, well I'm sure I can find something recent if I look."

"Good."

"You'll have to give me a photo of you, too," she replied, running her hand over his stomach and making him shiver.

Harry paused. He had photos of himself, but they were all magical ones. "Actually, I don't have any photos of me."

Aislinn gave an exaggerated pout. "Well, I'll have to get my camera out later."

...



They had a big farewell dinner that night, and talked quite late into the night. Harry was looking forward to crashing into his bed when he finally left the house, but it was his last night here.

So, instead of heading directly to the barn, he walked out to one of the fields and transformed.

He flew aimlessly for a while, just relishing in the freedom he felt.

Harry flapped his leathery wings, soaring quietly through the air and admiring the view his altitude offered. He was going to miss the quiet, beautiful landscape of Ireland, and Kreeside especially.

Conscious of the fact that he was nearing a small town and that he was quite low, Harry flew higher and turned around, heading back to the farm.

oOo

The day of Harry's return to London dawned, and he found himself feeling quite reluctant to go.

He spent the morning with Aislinn, lying on the grass with her wrapped in his arms, exchanging slow kisses.

He had lunch with the family, thanking Ana and Niall for everything. Then, it came time to leave.

He had told Niall that he was catching a bus from Galway to the ferry, but when he was dropped off, Harry went to the wizarding alley to use the Floo.

He stumbled out of the fireplace into the kitchen of 12 Grimmauld Place, finding the room empty.

The house seemed quiet, but he finally found someone in the drawing room at the top of the stairs on the second floor.

Dumbledore was looking intently into a glass cabinet full of trinkets, one that Harry remembered from a previous trip to Grimmauld Place. He seemed to be searching for something, but it appeared whatever it was wasn't there, because he stood up and turned away.

"Professor Dumbledore," said Harry, stepping into the room.

Dumbledore started, but then turned with a warm smile. "Harry, it is excellent to see you."

"You too, sir." Well, that wasn't exactly true. Harry found he didn't really care either way whether Dumbledore was there or not. He had once looked up to the headmaster, but the last year had left him feeling troubled when it came to Dumbledore. The man still treated Harry like a child, even when he expected him to defeat Voldemort. It made him feel like he was just a pawn in Dumbledore's chess game with Voldemort.

"May I ask where you have been these past weeks?"

Harry shrugged lightly. "Here and there."

The twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes dulled, but only the tiniest bit.

"I understand that you feel the need to be independent, Harry. After all, you are a young man now. But, you must remember that people are trying to protect you. We can't do that if we don't know where you are, my boy."

Harry smiled. "I appreciate that, professor. Seeing as I'm perfectly fine, it doesn't matter where I've been. Now, well I'm back, and I'll be staying until it's time to go back to Hogwarts."

Dumbledore nodded, looking at Harry appraisingly. "You'll be glad to hear that Miss Granger and the Weasleys will be arriving tomorrow morning. I believe they're planning a trip to Diagon Alley to collect their school things."

"Could I get my key off you then? I'll need to buy my own things."

Harry was expecting Dumbledore to say no, but instead he nodded, smiling. "I'll have it for you tomorrow."

...

Harry didn't see his relatives that day, but he did see Remus and Snape, who were both living in the house.

Lupin was pottering around the library most of the day, so Harry did as well. Apparently the Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were keeping Dudley well away from any wizards and they spent most of their time shut up in a bedroom on the second floor, only coming out for meals and to use the bathroom.

Harry found their self-imposed imprisonment quite ironic, and more than a little bit amusing.

oOo

The Weasleys arrived the next day, with Hermione. Ron joined Harry in his room on the second floor, and Ginny and Hermione were sharing a room across the hallway from them.

They went to Diagon Alley in the afternoon, and it was a quick, but enjoyable affair. They collected their books and new robes before stopping at Weasley's Wizard Wheezes to say hello to Fred and George.

...

Harry, Ron and Hermione were sitting in the drawing room that night when Harry saw a bulky shadow hanging around the square of darkness that led to the hallway.

"Duds! Don't hang around in the doorway, come in."

Dudley sidled into the room and stood close behind Harry, peering nervously at Ron and Hermione. Harry rolled his eyes and pushed Dudley closer to them. "They won't bite. Guys, this is Dudley. Dudley, meet Ron and Hermione."

Hermione gave a small smile, while Ron's mouth twisted slightly, not quite eradicating the glare on his face. Dudley shifted nervously, giving a small grunt to say hello.

"So your mum and dad finally let you out did they? I've been here since yesterday morning and not seen you once."

Dudley shrugged and settled down on the floor, slightly behind Harry.

Hermione tried to make conversation with Dudley, much to Harry's amusement and Ron's annoyance, but Dudley only grunted in reply.

There was the sound of soft footsteps from the hallway, and the four of them looked over to see Aunt Petunia clinging to the door frame. "Dudders, it's dinner time darling."

Ron snorted at the nickname, earning an elbow in the ribs from Hermione.

Dudley left without a word of goodbye.

"How can you be so nice to him after he's treated you like he always has?" asked Ron, as soon as Dudley and Aunt Petunia had disappeared around the corner.

Harry shrugged. "It's not like we're friends, but I feel a bit sorry for him being cooped up in a house full of wizards. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon always drilled a fear of magic into him, so I imagine he's pretty miserable being here."

"Harry, he's always been a right prat! You can't just start being all nice, just because you feel sorry for him!" exclaimed Ron, an indignant expression on his face.

"He wasn't exactly taught any other way to treat me," said Harry quietly, "but I think something's knocked some decency into him; he was actually quite nice when I went back to Privet Drive."

“Well, maybe he’s just growing up,” commented Hermione lightly. “Do you think I should try and talk to your Aunt? It must be awfully boring shut up in that room all the time. Maybe if I tell her I’m from a muggle family, they might be more inclined to mix with everyone else.”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t think there’s any point in trying, Mione. Besides, I’d prefer you didn’t go near Uncle Vernon at all. He wasn’t exactly happy to see me here the other day, and I doubt he’d take kindly to anyone magic trying to befriend his family.”

oOo

After a few days, Harry realised that Aunt Petunia came down early every morning, before many of the houses occupants had risen. She would make a cup of tea, and then take a tray of toast or cereal upstairs for Dudley and Uncle Vernon.

Having been living on the farm, Harry had gotten into a routine of waking early, so on his third day at Grimmauld Place, he waited in the eerie silence of a sleeping house for his aunt to arrive.

He gazed up at the picture of the barn on the wall, where he had hidden several times to watch Order meetings. He wondered if there was a way to get into the paintings from Grimmauld Place, but he doubted it. He was looking forward to returning to Hogwarts, where he would be able to visit the chamber and the paintings again.

He stared wistfully at the barn; it reminded him of Kreeside, and his thoughts turned to Aislinn, a small smile curving his lips, until he heard the door swing open softly.

Aunt Petunia didn’t realise he was there until she was halfway to the kettle and he cleared his throat. She gave a small squeak and spun around, her hands over her mouth.

“Harry!” Her pale face regained a bit of the colour that had flooded out of it. She turned away again, and Harry got straight to the point.

“Do you know Professor Snape?”

“What?” she asked distractedly, as she filled the kettle. “Snape. N-well, yes, but not really.”

Harry, surprised at the easy answer, sat forward, his interest growing. “What do you mean? Where do you know him from?”

Aunt Petunia waved a bony hand and leaned back against the cupboard. “He was friends with your mother when we were children.”

Harry frowned, unable to believe what Aunt Petunia had just said.

“Do you mean at Hogwarts?”

“Well, yes, I suppose. But she knew him before that. He lived in a house near us, see. Of course, we lived in a nice area, but he was down Spinner’s End, a bad neighbourhood.”

Harry’s frown deepened. “When you say friends, what do you mean exactly?”

Petunia jumped when the kettle whistled, but she answered as she turned and filled her cup.

“He was the one who told her all about magic and that school of yours. From then on they were practically inseparable,” she said, a bitter tone entering her voice. “Lily didn’t have time for her sister anymore, oh no! She was too caught up in being a witch! And then they went to Hogwarts together, and even when she was back home for the holidays, she was always with him.”

Aunt Petunia clearly wasn’t in the mood for toast this morning, because as soon as she had spat out the sentence, she took her teacup and swept out of the kitchen without another word.

Harry sat back in his chair, with something akin to shock numbing him.

Snape had told him innumerable times that he was exactly like his father, spent detentions and Occlumency lessons telling Harry all about his arrogant, selfish, no-good father, but not once had Snape mentioned that he had been friends with his mother.

For some reason, it angered Harry greatly. He jumped up and left the kitchen, intent on finding Snape. He knew the man was living here over the holidays; he had seen him in the library, and occasionally at meals.

It was early, but he doubted that Snape wouldn't be up.

After a half an hour of fruitless searching, Harry gave up and made his way up to Sirius' room. It wasn't that he was feeling nostalgic or sentimental; it was that he was unlikely to be disturbed. No one ever went up to the room, so he was pretty much guaranteed to be left alone while he thought.

There was a window in the room which opened up, allowing fresh air into the room, and Harry sat on the window sill with his legs dangling out the window.

He had a good view from the window, looking down the cobbled street of Grimmauld Place. It was mostly quiet, but people were starting to leave their houses for work. Sitting up high and looking down on it all gave Harry the almost irresistible urge to transform and fly, but there was no chance that he wouldn't be seen if he did.

He sat thinking about what Aunt Petunia had said until he heard the household beginning to stir, and he headed downstairs to the kitchen for some breakfast.

He saw Snape several times that day, but it was always when one of them was with other people, so he didn't get a chance to confront him. Finally that night, after Ron and Hermione had gone to bed and any Order members who had been around the house in the day had left, Harry found Snape alone in a makeshift potions lab that he had set up in the basement.

He entered the damp room silently, but Snape must have heard him. "Mr. Potter, it's late. Is there a reason you are wandering the house at such an hour?"

Harry spoke to Snape's back, where he was preparing the ingredients for some potion or other. "I wanted to ask you something."

"What might that be?"

"You never told me you knew my mother."

Snape's hand jerked, knocking over a small jar that sat on the table. He stood it up, before resuming his preparation. "I assumed you knew that I knew her. You know I was in the same year as your father. One would think you would logically conclude that I therefore knew your mother as well."

"You know that isn't what I mean. I asked my Aunt if she knew you. She told me you were friends with my mum, before Hogwarts."

Snape stilled, and Harry saw the very edge of his mouth turned down in a frown.

"Did she," he said tonelessly, wiping his hands on a towel that hung over the side of the workbench.

After a moment of silence, Snape lit a fire under the cauldron and poured a large beaker of water in, before arranging several bowls of ingredients next to the cauldron. Harry scowled; it appeared Snape wasn't going to elaborate.

"Well, is it true?"

"We knew one another," replied Snape shortly, staring into the cauldron as he waited for it to come to the boil.

Harry walked around to the other side of the bench so that he was face to face with Snape, but the Potion Master's eyes did not leave the shiny silver cauldron, which was beginning to bubble.

"Could you tell me about her?"



“And what is it you’d like to know, exactly, Potter?” snapped Snape, his nostrils flaring as he sprinkled some kind of powder into the water, turning it a clear green.

“Why are you acting all defensive?” asked Harry quietly, a beseeching tone in his voice. “I just want to hear about my mother. Everyone tells me about my dad, and you’re no exception, but the only thing I know about my mum is that I’ve got her eyes. If you were friends with her, why can’t you just tell me something about her? I don’t care what it is.”

“Pass the Dragon Fly wings.”

“Wh – oh.” Harry picked up a small dish filled with filmy black wings and passed it to Snape.

“We met when we were nine,” said Snape quietly, frowning as he tipped the bowl of wings into the water. “In the park near where we both lived. Did your Aunt tell you that?”

Harry shook his head. “No.”

“She and your Aunt were playing on the swings, and Lily was doing magic. I had seen them before, and I knew your mother was a witch, but I had never approached them before.”

Harry started when Snape called his mother Lily. He had never thought of his mother as a child, either, always just as his mother. “But you did that day?”

Snape nodded curtly. “Pour in the armadillo bile slowly.”

Harry picked up a small vial of yellow liquid, looking up at Snape to verify it was the right vial. Snape said nothing, so he pulled off the stopper and poured it in slowly and evenly while Snape stirred.

“Your aunt knew who I was, Merlin knows how, and she wasted no time in telling Lily that I was no good.”

Harry snorted – he could easily imagine that.

“Lily however was always willing to give people a chance, and though Petunia was offended when I called her sister a witch, Lily was open to the suggestion and wished to know more.”

“Aunt Petunia said you were the one that told mum all about magic and Hogwarts.”

“Yes,” agreed Snape, dumping a substantial amount of powdered mandrake root into the cauldron. The potion thickened instantly, turning a darker green. “She didn’t know how she could do the things she could, and I was of course able to explain.”

“Were you still friends at Hogwarts?”

Snape quirked an eyebrow. “You mean when she was sorted into Gryffindor and I into Slytherin?”

To Harry’s surprise, Snape’s lips quirked slightly. “I admit I was not impressed, but in retrospect, there was no way she would ever have been in Slytherin. Still, Gryffindor.” Snape’s lip curled. “I would have thought Hufflepuff would have suited her better; she was very loyal. Ravenclaw would have suited her just as well. I suppose in the end though...” Snape frowned and shrugged, sprinkling newt eyes into the water. “One cannot deny she proved herself a Gryffindor.”

Snape was shredding ylang-ylang leaves into the cauldron, with an unsettling expression on his face.

Harry sat quietly for a moment, and Snape offered nothing further.

Harry recognised the potion Snape was brewing now; it was just a pepper-up potion, and Harry added the minced salamander tongue when it began to steam.

“So were you always friends? Even after she got married?”

Snape didn’t reply.

“Sir?”

"That's enough Potter," said Snape softly, extinguishing the flame that was heating the potion.

"But-"

Snape closed his eyes and sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Potter," he began, his tone resigned.

But no one had ever spoken more about his mother, and Harry was desperate to hear more. "You can't stop now!"

Snape glared. "If I wish to discontinue the conversation, I am perfectly at liberty to do so." The familiar edge had returned to his voice, and Harry knew Snape would say no more on the subject tonight.

Harry sat quietly as Snape siphoned the potion into a batch of flasks, setting them to the side in neat rows.

Snape waved his wand, muttered "Evanescio" at the dregs in the cauldron, and then turned to Harry. "Come along."

Harry slid off his stool and walked through the door that Snape held open, walking up the stairs ahead of his teacher.

Harry reached the door of his bedroom on the second floor. He paused with his hand on the handle and turned slightly.

"Thanks," he muttered, and after a moment Snape gave an almost imperceptible nod before continuing up the stairs to the third floor.

Harry entered his room and collapsed on the bed, and even though he was tired, he found he couldn't sleep. There was light on the horizon by the time he finally managed.

oOo

The next day was the last day before they were to return to Hogwarts, and despite the fact that he was tired from being up so late, he didn't

want to waste his last day of holidays, and so he rose after only a few hours of sleep.

He had the unfortunate luck of running into Uncle Vernon on the way down stairs. He hadn't seen him all week, thankfully. Out of the three Dursleys he was the most reclusive of them, not that Harry minded.

He moved to the left of the stairs, but Uncle Vernon blocked the way, staring at Harry with a hateful expression.

"I should knock you six ways from Sunday, for endangering my family, boy!"

"Uncle Vernon, we're in a house full of wizards," said Harry patiently. "You really can't do anything to me here."

He seemed to take Harry's comment as a challenge though, and stepped up to Harry's step, so that he was looking down at him.

"There's no one here right now," he hissed, gesturing around them, and Harry rolled his eyes.

"Someone will likely come along any minute, so I'd suggest you don't try to push your luck, just get out of my way."

Uncle Vernon's face purpled rapidly at Harry's tone of voice, but he stepped aside anyway, allowing Harry to continue downstairs.

After breakfast, he, Ron, Hermione and Ginny spent the day lounging in the drawing room, playing Exploding Snap and wondering amongst themselves what the Order was up to. They still weren't allowed at Order meetings, even though three of them were of age.

Harry wondered briefly if he should tell Ron and Hermione about the Chamber, and about using the paintings to spy on Order meetings when they got back to Hogwarts. On the one hand, he felt it was something that was his, something that he should keep to himself. On the other hand, he expected them to be open with him, and that wasn't really fair if he wasn't going to the same for them.

In the end, he decided to keep it to himself for the moment. There was plenty of time to decide later.

oOo

Harry lay in his bed at Grimmauld Place that night, running over the events of the previous week.

He was going back to Hogwarts tomorrow, for the last time. The thought filled him with sadness, but he made a resolution; this year was going to be good – great even. He wasn't going to let anything hold him back or bring him down, and he was going to make the most of anything that came his way.

oOo

Hmmm..... not sure what I think of this chapter. I think it's not very well written, a bit rushed. It was a bit of a filler too, because I couldn't have Harry just suddenly going back to school. So next chapter Harry is back at Hogwarts, and things will get interesting. (At least, I think it's looking good).

Thank you so much to everyone who reviewed the last chapter : ) : ) : ) I'm extremely excited, because we're nearly at 500 reviews. Hehe I remember when I started and there was about three reviews. Hopefully I haven't missed anyone – if I did I'm sorry...

Queen Victoria, Alexiad, cyiusblack, Oversized Bucket, Elfwyn, nxkris, Forgotten Lake, ams71080, Darkwill0w, Vanessa riddle, black-heart-green-eyes, La Mariane, RockIII, jenstarfire, Jensindenial3516, justanotherfan756, Persidie, DemonicDragoness, Kaeim, tiny099, Slytherin66, Malimber, justanotherfan756 (again), tiny099 (again)

and

Franklin: Thanks for reviewing : )

confused in Conneticut: hm, sorry about that. Thanks for the review.

Kris: Thanks for reviewing, as always!

QuannanHade: I suppose I can forgive you for not reviewing the last few chapters... have a good holidays : )

Condefender: Thanks heaps for reviewing, glad you like the story... I love you too... hehe... and your second review made me laugh : )

“Come on Ron, get up. You aren’t going to get breakfast otherwise.” Harry threw a pillow across the room at the redhead, but he only groaned and rolled over. Harry had been up since the early hours of the morning, but Ron was still immersed in blankets and pillows.

Harry went downstairs alone, finding Ginny and Hermione already eating, with Mrs. Weasley bustling around doing last minute things.

“Is Ron up yet, Harry dear?” she asked, seeing him just as he was about to go into the kitchen.

“Er... not sure. I woke him, but...” Harry trailed off, shrugging helplessly but knowing she would understand. Mrs. Weasley tisked and rolled her eyes knowingly before hurrying up the stairs.

He entered the kitchen and joined the two girls at the table.

“Hey Harry,” said Ginny, smiling over her breakfast.

“Hey. All packed?”

“Yes, I just have to bring my trunk down. Hermione’s already brung hers down,” said Ginny, nodding towards a trunk near the fireplace. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say she’s pretty keen to go back to school.”

Harry smirked at the understatement. “Well I know I’m looking forward to it. I can’t wait for Quidditch.”

Hermione shook her head and muttered, “Quidditch, of course.”

At that moment, a tussle-haired Ron entered the kitchen and began piling up a plate full of food.

“Hey Ginny, how did you go on your OWLS?” asked Harry.

Ginny gave a casual shrug. "Not bad. I'm taking all the same subjects as Ron did, plus potions."

Harry nodded and went back to his breakfast.

"Oh, did Hermione tell you she got Head Girl?" asked Ginny, grinning at Hermione.

"Oh, no! I didn't tell him." Hermione dove into her trunk and pulled out a shiny badge.

Harry smiled. "Congratulations Hermione."

Hermione grinned happily and shook her head. "I can't believe I forgot to tell you."

"It's not like it was a surprise, though," said Ron. "Who else would have gotten Head Girl? What I want to know is who got Head Boy. I thought for sure that you would, Harry."

"Speaking of new leaders, the new Minister for Magic will be elected soon," said Hermione, reading the front page of the Daily Prophet.

"Who's running?" asked Harry.

There's I think four in total, but the frontrunners are Kingsley Shacklebolt and a bloke named Septimus Thorne.

"You know, I bet Kingsley's running for the Order, don't you think?" said Hermione, lowering her voice, thought there were no adults in the room.

Harry nodded slowly, but he was frowning. "Septimus Thorne?" He was sure he'd heard the name somewhere before.

"Yeah, he's a high-ranking Ministry official. Works in foreign affairs or something, I think Dad said." Ron stuffed a whole piece of toast into his mouth, effectively shutting himself out of the conversation.

"Harry?" questioned Hermione, seeing the troubled look on his face.



Harry's brow was furrowed as he struggled to remember where he'd heard the name, and slowly it came to him. "I think... I think he's a Death Eater."

Ron choked on his toast, while Hermione and Ginny leaned in.

"Are you sure?" asked Hermione. "How do you know? Did you... see it?"

Harry nodded slowly.

"But I thought you would have stopped the visions by now, what about the Legilimency? Isn't that working either?"

"It is," replied Harry, leaning over to read the article that was still in Hermione's hands. "I've been having fewer visions lately, but they're still there."

"We need to tell someone," said Ron. "Where'd mum go? She can tell the Order."

Harry waved the suggestion aside. "Oh, they'd know. Snape would have told them he was a Death Eater."

Ron narrowed his eyes, but didn't say anything.

"But it isn't something that's public knowledge, is it?" asked Ginny. "The public are the people who need to know; they're going to vote for him, and then we might have a Death Eater controlling the Ministry."

"That's a good point," mused Hermione. "Although, you never know whether elections are actually won on the basis of votes, do you?"

Ron nodded wisely. "Yeah, all that corruption. Dad says even Fudge is a bit corrupt, and he's just an idiot."

Harry pushed his plate away and stood up to go and get his trunk. "I have a Legilimency lesson with Professor Snape on Tuesday night. I

suppose I could ask him about it. No guarantees he'll tell me anything though."

...

At a quarter to nine, they all assembled in front of the floo to go to King's Cross.

They found an empty compartment on the train and the four of them piled in, putting their trunks up in the overhead compartments.

"Come on, Ron. We have to go to the prefects' compartment." Hermione prodded Ron to make him move from the seat he had collapsed on.

Ron groaned, but allowed Hermione to pull him to his feet. Then he brightened. "We can find out who Head boy is."

Harry and Ginny waved goodbye as Ron closed the door. No sooner had it closed however, then it was opened again. A slight bespectacled blonde girl entered, followed by a larger dark haired boy.

"Luna!" exclaimed Ginny, pulling the Ravenclaw into a hug and then helping her put her trunk up.

Harry did the same with Neville, minus the hug. "How were your holidays, Neville?"

Neville smiled and shrugged, taking a seat next to Luna and across from Harry. "Same as usual, I'm sure you can imagine what it's like being stuck with Gran. Yours?"

Harry grinned. "Best ever. I'll tell you all about it when we get to school," he replied, mindful that someone could be listening to their conversation.

The four of them chatted amiably for an hour until the compartment door sprang open. "Malfoy!"

“Huh?” The four of them looked up to see Ron enter, followed by Hermione.

“Malfoy got Head Boy!” fumed Ron.

“What!?” asked Harry, unsure he’d heard correctly. Malfoy was a Death Eater! Surely Dumbledore knew that? Why would he put someone like that in a position of responsibility and influence?

“I know! Bloody ridiculous, isn’t it?” grumped Ron, throwing himself down on his seat. “But it’s about marks, mostly, and behaviour. From a teacher’s point of view, Malfoy’s a pretty good choice.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose at Ron’s words, remembering the incident where Death Eaters had infiltrated the castle. “Are you saying you think he deserves to be Head Boy?”

Ron rolled his eyes. “No, of course not. The stupid git shouldn’t even be a prefect. I’m just saying he gets good marks and he’s a suck up to teachers, so was a logical candidate, you know? Anyway, his father probably bribed somebody.”

Now Hermione rolled her eyes. “Ron, Head Boy is picked by the teachers, like you said, and final say is by Dumbledore. I doubt he, or any other teachers for that matter, would accept money from Lucius Malfoy.”

“Snape would.”

“No he wouldn’t!” said Harry, immediately jumping on the defensive.

Everyone looked at him in surprise. “Well he wouldn’t!”

Ron waved the argument away. “Whatever. It stinks though; he’s going to take points of Gryffindor every chance he gets.”

...

The light was fading as the Hogwarts Express pulled into Hogsmeade station. The thestral-drawn carriages were waiting as usual, and the

six of them piled into one. Harry noticed six people didn't fit quite as comfortably as they had a few years ago.

The carriage rocked and swayed before coming to a halt, and they all scrambled out in front of the school

A group of Slytherins were getting out of the carriage next to them, and Harry saw that it was some of the group from their year, including the new head boy.

The Slytherins around him variously sneered and jeered when they saw Harry's group, but Malfoy walked straight past, ignoring them completely. Harry noticed the silver badge on his chest that designated him Head Boy.

They filed into the hall and took seats at the familiar table. Gradually the Hall quietened and the new first years were led in while McGonagall placed the old Sorting Hat on the same stool Harry and his friends had sat on in their first year.

In the silence of the Hall, the Hat broke into song:

The time, it seems, has come again

For me to sort you out

To sort you in with your own kind

Depending on your mind

I'll send, I think, to Gryffindor

Those who have courage in store

Strength of mind or strength of heart

These are what set you apart

To Hufflepuff you'll get to go

If loyalty is what you show

If justice is what you espouse

Then this is sure to be your house

Ravenclaw is for you if

Intelligence is your own gift

For all of you who've a quick wit

This is where you'll nicely fit

Lastly there is Slytherin

For those of great ambition

If you strive for greatness

Then here you'll do your best

One thing you should remember

Despite where you belong

When alone we are weak

And together we are strong

The hall applauded the hat, and then McGonagall began calling students forward to be sorted.

After each student had been sorted, and Dumbledore stood up to give a short speech.

"Welcome to our new students, and welcome back to our old ones." He smiled genially at the hall. "As usual, the Forbidden Forest is off limits to students, and a full list of banned objects can be found in Mr. Filch's office. We have Professor Tonks teaching defence for

students in first through fifth year, and Professor Slughorn teaching potions for those same years. Like last year, we have Professor Snape teaching the OWL and NEWT student in these subjects.”

Whispers broke out at Snape’s name, and Harry realised that most of the students probably hadn’t seen Snape since before he had been found out and nearly killed. He was glad to see that Tonks wasn’t posing as a student anymore, though he reminded himself to keep an eye on any new students who might actually be Order members recruited to manage his safety.

oOo

“You are progressing much faster than I expected,” muttered Snape, a grudging tone of approval in his voice.

Harry grinned at the rare praise as he got to his feet at the end of the Legilimency lesson.

“Have you been experiencing a decrease in the level of visions?”

Harry frowned slightly. “Well... yes, I suppose.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “You suppose?”

Harry took a deep breath and continued. “It doesn’t break the link. Remember you said that I was having so many visions because I was seeking information?”

Snape nodded slowly and Harry continued. “Well, Dumbledore still doesn’t tell me anything, so subconsciously, I still go looking. Some nights I’ll be really tired, and I’ll tell myself that I’m not going to, and that helps. Most of the time I won’t have visions. The problem is when I don’t tell myself that. My visions have become more... specific. More focussed, I think.”

Snape frowned and leaned forward, clasping his hands in front of him in thought.

“Then you must tell yourself every night that you don’t want to see anything.”

“But I do, and it could be a good thing, couldn’t it? I can perform Legilimency on him.”

“No.” Snape shook his head adamantly, glaring at Harry.

“He doesn’t know I have all these visions, does he?”

“I don’t believe so, but you have not been searching through his mind either - only seeing what he sees. There is a difference.”

“But if I keep learning to focus and control my mind, imagine what help it could be to the Order.”

“The answer remains the same – no. It is far too dangerous. We do not understand the exact nature of your connection with the Dark Lord. To attempt to take advantage of something we do not fully understand could prove disastrous.”

The tone of Snape’s voice brooked no further argument, and Harry sighed in defeat.

“There’s something I wanted to ask you before I go.”

“What, Potter,” asked Snape, the exasperation evident in his voice.

“We were talking about the election yesterday morning; my friends and I, that is. Anyway, Hermione told me that one of the frontrunners for the election is someone called Septimus Thorne.”

“And?” asked Snape after a moment’s pause.

“Is it the same Septimus Thorne that Vol- you-know-who was talking about? The one from the Inner Circle?”

“You remember that night?” asked Snape, a strange look appearing on his face.

“Parts of it. I feel like something important was said, but I don't remember it.” Harry looked at Snape expectantly, but the Potions Master averted his eyes. Harry noticed that his face also relaxed slightly.

“It is the same man, yes. But it is not something you should worry about.”

“We were wondering why something like that isn't being made public. People will vote for him, unless they know what he really is.”

Snape gauged Harry silently before finally answering. “Kingsley is one of the lead Aurors in the department. Given that, he would have knowledge of any known or suspected Death Eaters. The Auror department however, like the Order, has no direct proof that Thorne is a Death Eater, except my word. I never saw Thorne's face, so I cannot show a memory. Even if I could, my word is worth nothing to the current minister. Therefore, casting doubt on Septimus Thorne may also cast doubt on Shacklebolt's integrity. Needless to say, it is a little more complicated than simply telling people he is a Death Eater.”

Harry mulled over Snape's words as he made his way back up to the Tower. Once there, he wrote a quick letter to Aislinn, telling him he was back at school and that he had enjoyed the rest of his holidays. He set it on his bedside table to send in the morning and drifted off to sleep.

oOo

Harry wound his way up the stairs of the Astronomy Tower, lugging his telescope and bag. It was his second last class of the week: Friday night astronomy at 8:00.

He was hoping that the lesson would give him a chance to talk to Malfoy, who had steadfastly ignored him all week. Last year, they had worked in companionable silence, sometimes talking quietly about unimportant subjects while they mapped stars. Perhaps they still would.



He came to the top of the tower and looked around. Harry frowned when he saw that the Slytherin had not yet arrived. Given Malfoy's behaviour this past week, Harry doubted that if he set up first, the Slytherin would set up alongside him as they had done the previous year.

With that in mind, Harry stepped into the shadows of the tower and waited, watching as the few others in the class set up their equipment and rolled out star charts.

He only had to wait a minute.

Malfoy appeared silently, surprising Harry. The blonde looked around the tower and his eyes narrowed, probably noticing Harry's apparent absence. Pursing his lips, Malfoy strode over to the other side of the tower from the group of Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, and opened up his telescope.

Harry waited until Malfoy's telescope was aligned before he moved over and set his things down a metre away.

"Malfoy," he greeted shortly.

The Slytherin didn't reply - not that Harry had really expected him to - but his jaw tensed and his movements became jerky, as if he were trying not to bang things around in anger.

Harry set up his stuff and began to follow the instructions on the worksheet.

"Nice clear night tonight," he commented lightly, pausing to mark out a star on his chart.

Once again, there was no reply.

"So how were your holidays? Get up to anything interesting?"

Malfoy's jaw was clenched tightly, and he finally looked at Harry, anger blazing in his eyes.

“What are you playing at Potter? Can’t you take a hint?”

“I can, but I think you’re being a bit unreasonable,” he retorted, as he focussed his telescope.

Malfoy dropped his voice lower and leaned closer, with the pretence of marking out a star. “It isn’t like it was before, Potter. If I’m seen being friendly with you it could mean the end of my life. Don’t you understand that?”

“No one’s ever seen us being friendly, not once last year. It wouldn’t kill you to acknowledge me when you see me, and it isn’t going to hurt anyone if you want to keep coming down to the chamber.”

“I already have enough things to hide from him, without hiding the fact that I don’t actually hate you as much as I should!” hissed Malfoy.

“What other things?”

“Like...like- it’s none of your business! Things!”

“Like how you feel about him?”

“Don’t presume to know how I feel about anything! What do you think he would do to me if he looked in my mind and saw me in the chamber with you? I’m pretty sure he’d see that as a major deceit, don’t you?”

“So keep getting lessons from Snape.”

“Traitorous bastard,” came the mumbled reply.

“He wants to help you, Draco.”

Malfoy shot him a dirty look. “Yeah, I’ll bet you’re just best buddies with Se- nape now, aren’t you? Tell each other everything, I’m sure.” Malfoy’s face twisted bitterly.

Harry snorted. "Believe me, I can't see that happening any time soon, but I'll tell you one thing I know, and it isn't because he told me. He cares about yo-"

"You don't know anything, Potter, so stop talking."

"I can understand why you're upset, but he did the right thing. You can too."

Malfoy scrunched up his star chart and shoved it into his bag, hastily collapsed his telescope, and stormed away, the sound of his angry footsteps echoing as he went down the staircase.

Harry sighed in defeat and went back to his work.

oOo

"Harry, there's something me and Ron wanted to talk to you about," said Hermione as they sat eating breakfast the next morning.

Harry his eyebrows, his mouth too full to answer.

Hermione continued. "Well, we were wondering if you wanted to take up the DA again?"

Ron cut in. "I mean, me and Mione will keep it up even if you don't want to come back, but you were a better teacher than we are. I'm just bad at teaching, full stop. Mione's better, but she gets a bit bossy."

"Ron!" exclaimed Hermione, looking affronted.

"Face it Mione, you do get a bit narky when people don't pick things up as fast as you, and that's pretty much everybody. Remember those first years you scared off?"

Harry tried to conceal his grin as Hermione pursed her lips and sniffed. "I wouldn't say I scared them off. Some students just come along once or twice, you know..."

Ron smiled indulgently and patted Hermione on the arm. "So anyway, people have been asking when the first meeting is. What do you think?"

Harry thought it over quickly, but it wasn't hard to make a decision. "Yeah, I'll do it. I did miss it a lot, actually."

Hermione beamed and Ron punched him lightly on the arm.

It would give him the opportunity for some physical activity, too. Since leaving the farm, he'd gone back to his usual lifestyle where the only exercise he got was Quidditch, and the lack of activity had started making him feel fidgety all the time.

He was still waking very early every morning, and he thought maybe he would start making use of the time instead of just sitting around in the common room until the sun came up and the other students came down.

The next morning, he dressed and glanced out the window of the dormitory. The still, silent grounds called invitingly to him, and he slipped out of the Tower and down to the lake, where he began a slow jog.

Even at the farm, he'd never done much aerobic exercise, and he was soon breathing heavily, though he felt wide awake and fresh from the exercise.

After an hour, he returned to the castle and had a quick shower before heading down to an early breakfast on his own.

oOo

It was the second week back before Harry had a chance to go down to the chamber. He and Ron were returning from dinner, and Hermione had gone off to the library.

"Want to go flying?" asked Ron as they climbed the staircase out of the Entrance Hall.

He did, but not on a broom. He also wanted to go down to the chamber, not having seen it since the previous school year.

“Not today. I’ve got charms homework to finish.”

“Okay, well I’m going to go down to the pitch. If you change your mind, I’ll be there for the next hour or so.”

Ron turned around and headed back the way they’d come, and Harry diverted his course to Myrtle’s bathroom.

It struck Harry that in the time he and Ron hadn’t been talking, Ron had changed.

Before, if Ron had asked Harry to go flying and he hadn’t wanted to, Ron would have simply not gone either. And before that, he’d said that he and Hermione would keep up the DA even if Harry didn’t want to.

It seemed that Ron, like Harry, had become more independent, and Harry thought that maybe their time apart had actually done quite a bit of good for all of them.

On the way however to the second floor, he passed by the Transfiguration classroom and the large painting there. It was one of the ones from which he could access the painting world, and instead of going straight to the chamber, he looked around him and, seeing no one, stepped forward.

To his surprise, his foot met the canvas, not sinking through it as he’d expected. Frowning, he pressed a bit harder, and his foot sunk through. It was harder than it had been before; he really had to sort of push himself into the painting, and though he felt relief that he could still get in, he was also worried about what had changed.

Once in, there was no resistance as he jumped from painting to painting, just the familiar tingle of the magical barrier between them.

He made a few experimental jumps into random paintings, just to check that he still could. Mostly he saw no one outside the frames, but on the third jump, he heard voices, and he paused.

It was clearly the end of a staff meeting, and teachers were milling about in small groups or leaving through either of the two doors that led into the room.

Harry ducked lower under the table when Professors McGonagall and Snape appeared right in front of his painting, speaking in low voices.

“Albus told me it was at your suggestion.”

Snape gave a brisk nod. “I think it will be good for him. He needs to know that he is valued, Minerva. He needs to know that he can actively help people, in however small a way.”

Professor McGonagall sighed and looked at Snape with what appeared to be pity. “I know you are... do you sure it's in the best interests of the students?”

“I have no doubt he will perform the task diligently. He will not shirk the responsibility he has been given. It isn't in his nature to do so.”

“Well, I hope you're right Severus.” McGonagall sighed again. “I'll be off then. I have hall duty tonight.”

Snape watched McGonagall go before turning and sweeping off in the opposite direction.

Harry thought they must be talking about Malfoy being Head Boy, and it certainly explained why Dumbledore had made the decision.

The room was empty now, so Harry came out from his hiding spot and jumped through to a painting opposite Myrtle's bathroom. There were no magical paintings in the chamber, so he wasn't sure he could jump through to them.

He hurried down the stone steps and past the basilisk, and through into the library.

It was exactly as he remembered it, and he smiled happily at being back.

He called Salazar and the snake uncurled slowly from around his waist, poking his head out of Harry's collar. The snake had been permanently attached to him since they'd returned to Hogwarts, and it would be a relief to be able to put the snake down somewhere for a while. He had been reluctant to let Salz explore the dormitory, telling him he had to stay on Harry's bed.

"Freedom, Salz," he hissed, and the snake hissed in agreement.

Harry went down the wide staircase and deposited Salazar on the branch on the low table that sat in front of the lounge.

"I'm going flying for a bit. I'll be back sssoon."

Harry stepped out onto the stone courtyard that looked out over the canyon.

It was going to be a very tight fit once he transformed, but he thought he would fit.

Harry faced towards the canyon and focussed on the change. The familiar tingling sensation rushed through him, and the ground dropped away as he grew.

He'd judged his size badly though, and his back legs scrabbled for purchase on the stone floor of the courtyard. He overbalanced however, and went toppling over the edge.

He felt a stab of horror before the rushing wind filled his leathery wings and he remembered he could fly. He'd known all along he could - he wouldn't have been transforming in the precarious position if he hadn't - but the shock of falling off the cliff had temporarily made him forget.

He spread his wings wide, gradually slowing, and then began to flap. His downward descent halted, and he began to fly up the river,

plummeting and swooping low so that he felt the spray of the white water, and then rocketing upwards to the top of the high cliffs on each side of the canyon.

He tried a few experimental spins and loops in the air, like he did on his broom.

The river widened out after a while, the water running more smoothly. Cliffs still ran along each side, but they were much further apart. Gradually he came to a wide sandy beach on one side of the water, and he descended, landing quite gracefully on the white sand.

He eyed his surrounds carefully, his eyes picking up details that he would never normally notice. He breathed and a foreign, yet strangely familiar smell came to him on the breeze.

Harry flattened his body against the ground, and slithered, pushing himself along with his legs, seeking out the source of the smell.

The only sound he made as he moved was the almost imperceptible sound of his scales sliding against the sand, and as he rounded a large rock, he saw it.

The dragon was a pale orange, with scales that had a slight iridescence in the sun. Long white spikes ran from the top of its head to the tip of its tail, and on each side of the dragons head, sharp horns protruded. It was sitting staring out of the water, its head held high and its back straight in a position that was oddly familiar.

Harry approached as silently as he could, but the dragon saw him and drew back in a defensive stance.

Harry froze instinctually, locking eyes with the dragon. He wasn't completely used to the way his body moved yet, and he didn't think he'd be able to fight off a fully grown dragon.

The dragon began to retreat slowly.

"Wait!" called Harry.



The dragon paused again, and its head tilted to the side slightly, much like a person would do when contemplating something. Some of the tension left the dragon's stance.

"Malfoy?"

Harry was sure the dragon's eyes narrowed then, and he knew that it was in fact him.

Harry looked closer, recognising features like the orange eyes and the white spikes from their practice sessions.

The dragon was now peering curiously at him, all signs of defensiveness gone.

After a few minutes of looking at each other, Harry looked back down the river, into the direction of the castle, and then back at the dragon. Then, he spread his wings and flew into the air. There was a whoosh behind him as Malfoy did the same.

In the air, Harry could see that the dragon was noticeable bigger than him, but then, so was the human Malfoy, so it wasn't entirely unexpected.

They flew side by side, and when Harry pulled ahead slightly, the dragon sped up to get in front. It became a race then, and it was the first time Harry had really tested his speed.

They were flying with a strong wind behind them, which increased their speed even more, and Harry felt like he was going impossibly fast.

The canyon became too narrow for them to fly side by side in most parts, and they were forced to fly above and below each other. Harry looked down, and was happy to see that he was nearly a full body length ahead of Malfoy.

After a few minutes of furious flying the canyon widened again as they approached the back of castle and they descended to the level

of the courtyard. Harry thought they should probably slow down, but there was no way he was going to let Malfoy win this race.

The small courtyard wasn't quite big enough for two large animals, and Harry timed his transformation, changing through the air so that he landed as a human.

It was difficult, and he landed hard, rolling several times because of his speed. He was stopped when he collided with the grey stone wall of the castle, his head ringing with the impact.

When his head stopped spinning, he sat up slowly. "Ow."

A loud thump and a sharp crack sounded to his left, followed by a voice. "Bloody hell, that hurt!"

oOo

I know I told some people this would be out ages ago... sorry for the massive delay. Life got in the way.

Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter    black-heart-green-eyes, cyiusblack, SHuntress, Forgotten Lake, La Mariane, Jensindenial3516, Kitten Cullen, RockIII, christoh13, PhoenixFlight72, Gillitine, Hippie Painter, Tempest07, mimiren4045, JonathLee, Oversized Bucket, ams71080, alliekiwi, -Yuna's Reincarnation- 1, Slytherin66

and

Peanut: Thanks heaps for the great review : )

QuannanHade: As usual, thanks for the fantastic review. And don't worry, there shouldn't be any more fillers in the near future ; )

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## Seventh and Final

“Bloody hell, that hurt!” groaned Malfoy, who was sitting on the ground a few metres away, nursing a knee.

“Yeah, need a bit of practice with that,” grunted Harry, pushing himself up. “But I won!”

Malfoy raised his nose imperiously, but the effect was somewhat destroyed as he clambered awkwardly to his feet, brushing off his clothes. “I wasn’t aware we were racing.”

Malfoy pulled his robe above his knee, revealing a bleeding cut just under his knee.

Harry rolled his eyes.

“How long have you been able to fully transform?” asked Malfoy.

“Only a few weeks now.”

“Mm, yes, me too.”

“I’m still not exactly sure what I am. I th-”

“You’re a wyvern,” stated Malfoy, and Harry detected an unexpected tone in his voice.

“Oh, come on, Malfoy! You’re a dragon! How can you possibly be jealous?” asked Harry, his tone amused and bewildered. “And what is a wyvern anyway? I’ve never heard of one.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Of course you haven’t,” he muttered. “Complete muggle.” He raised his voice and spoke. “Wyvern’s are extremely rare. Some people don’t even think they exist.”

“I thought I was a dragon, but I’d never heard of a dragon without arms. Apart from that though, there isn’t much difference.”

Malfoy shrugged. "I don't think wyvern's can breathe fire."

Harry's eyes lit up. "Can you?"

"Of course I can; dragon, remember?"

Harry felt a tinge of jealousy. He inclined his head towards the door to the chamber. "Coming inside?"

Malfoy pursed his lips, whatever levity might have been on his face rapidly disappearing.

"Do you think I'm the only person in the castle with a Mark, Potter? All it would take is one of the others to see me talking with you and questions will be asked. And I'm sure you know what methods of questioning he likes to use."

"No one is going to see us in the Chamber though, are they?"

"The answer is no."

With that, Malfoy transformed again and flew away, disappearing around a bend in the canyon.

Harry sighed and then turned to the door in the stone wall of the castle. He ran his finger down the indent and the door clicked open.

He gathered Salz, letting the snake curl around his shoulders, and then left the chamber. He stopped by the library on his way back to the common room, getting out a book about magical creatures and taking it up to the common room. He flopped down on some cushions in a corner and looked through the index until he came to the entry he wanted.

The name wyvern comes from the Saxon word Wivere, meaning serpent. The wyvern is most similar to a dragon but is considered by some to be more of a serpent, hence the name. During the middle ages the wyvern was thought to be extinct, though sightings in

remote mountain ranges and deserts have renewed hope that the wyvern may still exist.

In mythology, there are many stories of the most ancient and powerful wyvern, but due to its scarcity, some wizards claim that it is just that; myth, and that there is no such creature at all. Others still, believe that it is simply another species of dragon rather than a winged serpent. The vast majority, however, do believe it is a different species, no similar to a dragon than a horse is to a cow. What myth and sightings tell us about this creature is that it is a two legged, winged beast with a head crossed between a dragon and a serpent, and the tail of a snake. The wyvern may or may not breathe fire.

There are several reputable texts which tell us the wyvern is a close relative of the cockatrice, whose origins are in turn often compared with that of a basilisk. Due to the fact that all three animals are so exceedingly rare however, no reliable studies have been conducted to confirm whether there is any direct relation between basilisk, cockatrice and wyvern.

The passage ended there, and Harry put the book down, musing over what he had just read. He was definitely more serpent-like than the average dragon; he could slither along like a snake, even if he did have to use his legs a bit to push himself along, his jaw was definitely snakelike; he could remember that from transforming in the chamber and seeing his face in the mirror. His jaw opened very wide, dislocating.

He had sharp teeth like a dragon, but two on the top were longer than the rest, and he wondered if wyverns were venomous.

He was roused from his thoughts by Ron and Hermione, Ron flushed from flying and carrying a stack of books which he plonked down in front of Hermione.

He leaned over the one Harry had been reading and picked it up. "Why are you reading this? This is one of our Care of Magical Creatures texts."

“Just interested. I was reading about wyverns.”

“Oh, really!” said Hermione with enthusiasm. “I think it’s just fascinating that there are animals that are as mythical to wizards as things like dragons and unicorns are to muggles.”

Harry grinned at her exuberance. “Yeah, well I’d never even heard of a wyvern until today. They seem pretty interesting.”

“Pretty scary, if you ask me. Charlie reckons he saw one once, up in the mountains near the dragon reserve in Romania. Fred and George reckon he was having me on, but I believe him. He said it was eating a deer – swallowing it whole. Gross, eh? It’s like when snakes eat, which you’ve probably seen since you have one. Their whole jaw just sort of dislocates and opens up really wide, so they can stuff themselves.”

Harry blinked, and Hermione gave a small smile. “Ron spent a lot of time in the library with me when you weren’t around.”

Ron scowled. “Hey! I just like Care of Magical Creatures, okay. Just because I say something...” Ron trailed off, grumbling, a slight tinge of embarrassment on his face.

Harry feigned a look of surprise. “Oh? I thought you were talking about yourself for a second there...”

Hermione and Harry laughed, but it took Ron a second to get the joke before he gave a grudging grin.

oOo

Harry was heading back from Astronomy on Saturday night when he came upon Dumbledore in a corridor, viewing an oil painting.

“Ah, Harry. How are you this fine evening?” asked Dumbledore, turning at Harry’s approach.

“I’m fine, sir.”

Dumbledore turned to face him, and Harry caught sight of the blackened hand. Before he could stop himself, he asked, "Professor, what happened to your hand?"

Dumbledore peered at Harry closely, and then inclined his head. "Come, Harry. I think perhaps it is time I told you certain things I have been keeping to myself."

Dumbledore turned and walked, waiting for Harry after a few steps. Harry jogged to catch him and they started off, heading towards Dumbledore's office.

Neither spoke on the way there, and Harry used the opportunity to wonder what it was Dumbledore was going to tell him.

When they got to the Headmaster's office, Dumbledore went immediately to the Floo and threw a pinch of powder in. He stuck his head into the emerald flames.

When he withdrew, he was followed shortly by Professor Snape.

Snape paused on catching sight of Harry, who was equally puzzled, but then continued around the desk to take the seat on Harry's right.

Dumbledore waited until Snape was comfortably seated before addressing Harry.

"You asked, Harry, what happened to my hand. I must confess, it was entirely my fault." Dumbledore paused. "But I suppose I should begin at the beginning."

Harry sat forward eagerly, and out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Snape shifting too.

"The night that Voldemort disappeared sixteen years ago was a joyous occasion for many. I however knew it was only a matter of time before Tom returned, in some shape or form, to terrorise our world once again. Tom Riddle sought many ways to stave off death, you saw that in your first year when he attempted to steal the Philosopher's Stone. Years earlier however, even when he was at

Hogwarts, he found another way to prevent his soul from leaving this earth, even if his body was destroyed.”

Dumbledore paused, as if for effect, and Harry leaned even further forward.

“It was the darkest of magics. I doubt you have heard the term horcux, but that is what he used.”

Harry hadn’t heard the term, but Dumbledore was about to explain it to him.

“When a person commits the ultimate sin, when a person takes the life of another, their very soul is ripped. It may not rip completely apart or it may completely separate from the whole. Voldemort used spells to entomb those ripped parts of his soul into objects. What spells he used, I do not know, for Lord Voldemort has gone further than any other and deeper into the Dark Arts than any other in his quest for immortality. I have gathered from the memories of various people who associated with the young Tom Riddle that he made six horcruxes, separating his soul into seven pieces, as he believes seven to be the most magically powerful number.”

Silence descended on the office as Dumbledore allowed the knowledge to sink in. Harry finally broke the silence. “How do these horcruxes actually keep him alive? Are you saying that that’s why he didn’t die when the Killing Curse rebounded on him?”

Dumbledore nodded. “When a person dies, their soul can no longer be contained within the body, and the body is the only thing keeping a soul in this life. What Voldemort has in essence done is to create six more bodies for small parts of his soul. The soul cannot depart to the next life while a body still contains it, so while his body may have been destroyed, his soul was and is still bound to six other bodies.”

Harry sat back to digest this information, and saw Snape sitting completely unmoving in the chair next to him.

“Which brings me now to the answer to your question,” said Dumbledore, his tone brightening slightly. “It so happens that I



tracked down a horcrux, hidden in the ruins of his mother's childhood home. This ring -" Dumbledore ran a long finger across a green stone embedded in a gold ring on one blackened finger. " – was a horcrux. I foolishly put it on, releasing a curse he had put upon it to protect it."

Harry gasped, but Dumbledore just smiled. "Fortunately I was able to get the ring off and destroy the horcrux, and, as you can see, I have since subdued the curse." Dumbledore chuckled. "I now have a constant reminder to keep me careful when I should find the next one."

Harry frowned. "You know where the others are?"

"I have a few ideas, but let us leave the conversation for another night. I imagine you have a lot to think about."

Harry nodded. He wanted to know everything Dumbledore knew, and he wanted to know it now. At the same time though, he felt that his head couldn't hold anything more.

Harry stood to leave, rejoicing that Dumbledore was finally trusting him with information. He was at the door, and he held it open for Professor Snape, when he realized Snape was still sitting in his chair, his gaze fixed firmly on Dumbledore.

"Go on, Harry. Professor Snape and I have other matters to discuss."

Harry nodded again and left, his feelings of approval towards Dumbledore dwindling somewhat. He was being trusted, but clearly not with everything.

Harry descended the winding staircase and dashed across the corridor to the painting opposite the Gargoyle. He pushed himself into it, again finding it difficult. He didn't step all the way through to the room on the other side. Instead, he moved sideways focussing on one of the landscapes that adorned the walls of Dumbledore's office.

Taking a seat on the grass, he tuned back into the conversation.

"It is true that I have some idea of certain other horcuxes," said Dumbledore, his tone careful.

A look of relief crossed Snape's face. "All of them? Because if even one cannot be found... there are thousands upon thousands of objects he could have used, and even more hiding places in the world.

"That is true, and yet not entirely. I believe he used objects that are in some way significant to him. Similarly, he hid them in places of significance to him."

"And?" prompted Snape, his tone impatient, after an agonising silence.

"I believe the snake, Nagini, to be one."

"Nagini?" repeated Snape, perplexed.

Dumbledore inclined his head, his silver beard shining in the candle light. "She represents his famous ability to speak Parseltongue. You must have noticed she is rarely from his side. He protects her like no other."

Snape nodded slowly, a look of concentration on his face. "And the others?"

Dumbledore gave a small frown. "I am currently trying to track down a cup which belonged to Hufflepuff. It features in several memories I have of the young Tom Riddle whilst he was in the employ of Borgin and Burke. I am inclined to believe he procured an item belonging to each of the four founders, though what the others are I cannot be sure."

A look of defeat crossed Snape's face. "It is an impossible task, Dumbledore! How can you possibly, in all the world, track down five, or four, if this cup is indeed one, unknown objects?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Not five, Severus. Not even four."

Snape lips turned down in a frown and his forehead creased. "You mean you have found others? Why did you not tell the boy? Surely this knowledge would alleviate his worry?"

"Perhaps, in time, we must tell Harry. For now... no. I fear it would do little to alleviate his worry."

Snape's frown deepened. "What do you mean?"

"Do you recall in young Harry's second year how he defeated the memory Tom Riddle?"

A look of understanding dawned on Snape's face. "The diary was a horcrux?"

"Indeed it was, and it was only then that my theories of horcruxes were proven."

"I see no reason why you should not share this with Potter. He shall be thrilled that he has already taken a great step in defeating the Dark Lord."

"Perhaps, yes, it would not be so objectionable to tell him."

Snape waved the argument aside. "It does not matter what you do or do not wish to tell the boy. Have you any idea of the remaining three?"

"One I am not sure of, though I imagine I know where to look next. I found the hiding place some months ago, on the night our young Mr. Malfoy aided the attack on the castle. Unfortunately, I was later to find out that the horcrux had already been removed by another."

Snape sat straighter. "Another? Who would have had such knowledge?"

Dumbledore's beard twitched, and Snape's eyes widened at Dumbledore's answer. "One Regulus Black."

Harry's eyes widened at the name. Sirius' brother.

“Regulus? He was killed by the Dark Lord.”

“Yes, I imagine Voldemort eventually learned that Regulus’ ideas had changed somewhat and immediately killed him. Too late unfortunately, to keep his horcrux safe. I am quite sure however, that Tom does not realise his horcrux has been removed.”

“And the last two?”

“If I am correct, then he has found something belonging to Rowena Ravenclaw, though which item, I have yet to discover. It is the final horcrux, the one he mistakenly created, that is the cause for concern.”

Snape frowned. “Shouldn’t the one you do not know about be more cause for concern? And what to do mean by ‘mistakenly created’? You said he intended to create seven.”

“Indeed he did, and I believe he save the last for the kill he thought would cement his claim as the most powerful wizard in the world.”

“Wha-... killing Potter. You mean killing Potter?”

Dumbledore affirmed Snape’s statement and question.

“But he did not kill Potter, and he was not able to create a horcrux.”

“Of course, events did not go as he intended. Nonetheless, he committed murder that night. I cannot say whether it was the act of killing Lily or the act of throwing the killing curse at Harry, but a part of his soul was ripped from the whole, and when the curse rebounded upon him, that bit of soul latched itself onto the only living thing in that room.”

Harry felt that he couldn’t breathe. The silence that followed Dumbledore’s words was oppressive, deafening.

“You mean...” Snape seemed unable to finish, but Dumbledore gave a solemn nod to the unspoken question.

Harry waited with bated breath. Some small, detached part of him knew exactly what this meant, but the rest of him was taking a long time to catch up. His mind seemed foggy as he listened to their words.

Snape spluttered. "But all this time... all this time, we have been protecting him... so he can die at the right moment?"

Harry froze. Die? At the right moment? What was that supposed to mean? Harry instantly approved of Snape's venomous tone as he spoke to the Headmaster.

"I am afraid it is how it must be, Severus. Harry must die."

"Must die..." repeated Snape slowly, his face impassive. Harry felt the blood drain from his face.

Snape leaned over Dumbledore's desk, leaning on his hands.

"For the greater good, perhaps?" asked Snape in a silky tone, and Dumbledore blanched. "That always has been your creed, after all. Damn the individual, if it is for the greater good. All this time, I thought it was about keeping Lily's son safe, and now you tell me you have been raising him like a pig for the slaughter."

Despite the severity of the discussion and the tension in the room, Harry was shocked to see a twinkle enter Dumbledore's eye. "Ah, Severus. Have you come to care for Harry?"

Snape snarled as though the thought greatly offended him, but did not contradict Dumbledore. "Yes, Headmaster, perhaps I have changed, but you have not." Snape leaned closer still, his voice a deadly whisper and his face mere inches from Dumbledore's. "The fool I am, for thinking otherwise."

Snape swept from the room without waiting for a reply, though it did not look like he would have gotten one had he waited. Dumbledore was sitting frozen in his chair, a look of deep regret and sadness etched on his face.

After a moment, he slowly stood and ascended the staircase behind his desk.

Harry sat in the portrait long after the two professors had left the office, staring up into the endless blue sky. Harry must die echoed in his head, over and over and over.

...

It was late when Harry finally pushed himself into a seated position. "Ow!" Harry looked down at his palm. It was bleeding from a moderate cut – he had leaned on a sharp stick. "Great," he muttered. "Couldn't get any better!"

He grimaced and used the hand that wasn't throbbing and bleeding to get to his feet, before setting off to the edge of the painting.

He felt numb, unable to fully comprehend what had just transpired.

Years ago, Dumbledore had told him that on the night Voldemort killed Harry's parents, and failed to kill Harry, he had transferred some of his powers to Harry. Liar. There was a vast difference between a few powers and a soul.

Harry jumped through to a painting near the portrait hole to the Gryffindor common room and fell forward out of the painting and into the corridor.

A seventh of Voldemort's soul was somewhere inside him, but how big was it really? Big enough and strong enough that the Sorting Hat had wanted to place Harry in Slytherin, at least.

He turned the corner and muttered the password to the Fat Lady.

He was surprised to see people still up; it was past two o'clock in the morning, but Ron was playing chess against a first year, in a game that seemed extremely unfair to Harry. The first year was being trounced.

“Harry! What’s all over your hand?” shouted Ron in an overly loud voice as he approached.

“Oh, er...” Sometime during all his thinking on the way back, he had completely forgotten all about the pain in his hand. He held it up, inspecting it, and frowned, looking closer.

“It’s... paint,” he replied, mystified.

“Oh! Well, that’s alright. I thought you’d hurt yourself. Really looks like a cut from here.” Ron turned back to the game, promptly taking the first year’s last fighting piece.

It looked like a cut to Harry, too, and he was peering very closely at it. “Weird,” he murmured, before running a finger through the glistening red paint that had dribbled down a finger.

Some of the thinner bits had dried and were starting to flake around the edges. “I’m turning in Ron. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

oOo

The next evening Harry had a Legilimency lesson, and he trudged down to the dungeons. He wasn’t in the mood for a lesson with Snape after overhearing the conversation between him and Dumbledore. Legilimency lessons nearly always gave him a headache, and he already felt bad enough. He’d hadn’t slept for even a minute, going over and over that conversation in his head.

His friends had been questioning him all day about what was wrong, and eventually he had excused himself from the common room and gone down to the chamber to think in the dark and cool.

His stomach had forced him to venture to the kitchens for dinner and his conscience had convinced him to attend the Legilimency lesson.

He arrived at Snape’s office and the lesson began, going downhill very rapidly.

Snape had raised his barriers to a new level, and though he tried, Harry simply couldn't focus.

After the fourth failed attempt, Snape lowered his shields slightly, and after the sixth failed attempt, Harry slumped down in his chair, glaring at the desk and Snape gave a huff of annoyance. "What is wrong with you, Potter? You have absolutely no concentration tonight."

Harry didn't answer for a moment, and Snape raised an expectant eyebrow. "Well?"

"Dumbledore thinks I have to die."

There was not even a flicker of surprise on Snape's face but he gazed at Harry silently for a minute before replying. "What do you mean?"

Harry's glare moved from the wooden desk to Snape. "You know exactly what I mean!"

Snape reclined and steepled his fingers, still staring intently at Harry. "How did you find out?"

Harry shrugged the question aside. "That doesn't make any sense, though! Has he forgotten the prophecy? I'm supposed to have some 'power Voldemort knows not.' Where does that fit into Dumbledore's crackpot theory?"

"Much as you may wish otherwise, Potter," said Snape softly, "It is not a 'crackpot' theory at all. Prophecies are notoriously unreliable. I much prefer to focus on the evidence at hand, and Dumbledore's evidence is strong and logical."

Snape paused. "Sometimes in war we have to make the most terrible sacrifices."

Harry's eyes flickered back to Snape's but the professor was no longer looking at him; he was staring somewhere over Harry's left shoulder, his eyes unfocussed.



“What sacrifices have you made, Professor?”

Harry wanted an answer, wanted to know that someone had given up something akin to what he was being asked to give up, but Snape sat unmoving and silent.

After a few moments, Harry stood and left.

He felt Snape's eyes burning into the back of his neck, but the Potion's Master made no attempt to stop him.

oOo

I quite enjoyed writing this chapter, so I hope you all enjoyed reading it. I'm getting a bit stressed with all the uni work I have at the moment, so updates might be going to slow down a bit. I've already written some of the next chapter though, so hopefully that one will be out in about a week.

A big cheer to ams71080 for being the 500th reviewer, and A Silver Dragon for being the 501st. : )

Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter.

riddle\_.uk, call015, Emerald Eyes of Flame, La Mariane, ams71080, A Silver Dragon, Forgotten Lake, pink-fogg, tiny099, Makurayami Ookami, shiftyless, nxkris, Snuggalette, christoh13, Concealed Convict, mhs02, QuannanHade, Slytherin66, Jensindenial3516, Persidie, Len87, Amras Black-Fox and mekareami.

## Another Way

Harry didn't return to the Gryffindor common room. Instead, he moved deeper into the dungeons until he came to the hidden doorway near their potions classroom. He hissed 'Open' and stepped into the dark passageway. He wandered slowly along through the dark stone and earth passageways, gradually coming to the chamber library.

He was too mentally exhausted to do any homework, so he went straight to the bedroom. He had only used it a few times before, but he was always glad it was there when he needed it.

oOo

Harry slept though Monday. The revelation that he had to die in order for Voldemort to be defeated drained him, and though he woke several times throughout the morning, he couldn't drag himself out of bed to go to his classes.

It was after lunch when he finally woke properly, but he didn't bother getting out of bed. He was overcoming by a feeling of lethargy and he couldn't get the conversation between Snape and Dumbledore out of his head.

He'd thought Dumbledore was finally trusting him, finally telling him important things, but he hadn't really told him the important bits at all. Like usual, Dumbledore had left out the vital details, telling Harry only enough to string him along and make him think he was being let in on the big secrets.

Leaving out the part where Harry had to die was too big a lie in Harry's opinion.

In an effort to put the conversation from his mind, Harry summoned his bag. He could now effortlessly perform the summoning charm wandlessly and wordlessly, and lumos he could do wandlessly.

He pulled a sheaf of parchment out of his bag and wrote a letter to Aislinn, but it had a depressing overtone and he ended up throwing it away. Instead he wrote to Dudley, and though the letter was really no better than the one he had written Aislinn, he doubted Dudley would be sensitive enough to pick up on it.

oOo

He'd missed all of his classes on Monday, but he couldn't bring himself to emerge from the chamber. Ron and Hermione were bound to notice his depressed mood, and there was no way he could tell them, at least for the moment. Not wanting to fall behind in the first week however, he slipped into the waterfall painting, shivering under the cold water, and then moved sideways into the paintings. He jumped through into a painting in his Transfiguration Room, finding he had arrived early.

There was a limited range of paintings in this room, but he found a relatively well hidden spot in a painting of a tower. The window was dark and he didn't think anyone would pay too much attention to it anyway; he never had.

He moved through all his classes in the same way, ignoring the way each teacher and his friends looked worriedly at his usual desks each time he failed to answer his name when the roll was called.

There was one occasion when he actually called out 'Here,' and people heard him. He had shrunk down in the painting, and after a few confused moments, the teacher assumed someone was mucking around and continued on.

That evening, Harry began scouring the library for a book on Horcruxes. There was a substantial section of books on the Dark Arts, and he had no doubt if there was anything about Horcruxes in the Chamber library, that they would be in that section.

...

It was Wednesday afternoon before Harry finally found a book that even mentioned Horcruxes, and even then it was only the tiniest of

explanations, no longer than a few lines in a dusty old tomb that was hand-written in a scrawl he could hardly understand.

It told him what Dumbledore had said; that objects could be used to store parts of the soul, thereby averting ones death if their own physical body was destroyed. It also mentioned that breaking the vessel which held the soul would result in the release of the soul, and that that part of the soul could never be regained.

Harry supposed this was how a Horcrux was destroyed, but it didn't bode too well for him.

oOo

On Thursday afternoon, Harry ventured to Dumbledore's office through the paintings. Once again, it was difficult to get into the waterfall painting, and he wondered what had changed. The only thing he could think of was that he didn't have the Pendant any more, but he didn't know why that should really change anything.

Dumbledore's office was empty when he reached it, but seeing as he'd heard no Order business or anything else in a while, he decided to wait.

He waited for an hour, dozing in the lush green grass of his painting, before Dumbledore led in the Minister for Magic.

"Please Cornelius, have a seat," said Dumbledore genially, and Fudge accepted the offer.

"If I might, Cornelius, you appear quite flustered."

"Yes, well, with the election coming up, you can imagine I'm quite busy tidying up any affairs that need tidying. I have much to do, much to do."

"May I ask what your plans are after the reins are handed over?"

Fudge twirled his bowler hat between his fingers. "Retirement. You cannot imagine how glad I am to put politics behind me."

Dumbledore gave a polite smile. "Yes, well, you have held your position for quite some time now. Eleven years, if I am correct?"

Fudge nodded distractedly. "Yes, yes. Look, Dumbledore, I am in rather a hurry, and we have the matter of the missing student to discuss. The authorities should have been alerted after forty eight hours, that is the policy of the school is it not? And yet, it was only just this morning that we became aware of the situation, and not because we were told through the proper lines, either!"

Dumbledore inclined his head. "I, and the rest of my staff, felt it would be prudent to keep the situation under wraps for the time being, given the identity of our missing student."

Fudge pursed his lips, annoyance showing on his face.

"The truth is that Harry has gone off on his own before, and he turns up in his own good time. I'm quite sure it's the case this time."

Fudge relaxed slightly, though the annoyance on his face grew more pronounced. When he spoke, there was a triumphant tone in his voice. "The boy is troubled, Dumbledore. I've said it all along. Half the reason if you ask me is that the fame has gone to his head. He thinks he can get away with anything, and you only encourage that by letting him do as he pleases!"

"Harry will be reprimanded the same as any other student, Cornelius."

Fudge stood and muttered. "Yes, well, I must be on my way. If you really think the boy's just gone off lollygagging or whatever else, then I have more important things to attend to."

Dumbledore gave a wide smile and stood to show the Minister out.

Minutes later, the door opened again, this time revealing Professors McGonagall and Snape.

"Anything?" Dumbledore asked Professor McGonagall immediately.

“Still no one has seen him, Albus. I am beginning to fear the worst. He has been captured by Death Eaters. Why else would he disappear?”

“Brooding, most likely. Hiding away somewhere feeling sorry for himself.”

“Severus!”

Snape turned and raised a sardonic eyebrow. “What, Minerva?”

“This is a serious situation, and here you stand making light of the situation. We have no idea where he is. For all we know, You-Know-Who could have him!”

Snape scoffed. “The Dark Lord does not have him, Minerva.”

“How can you be so sure, Severus?”

Snape’s lips tightened, but after a moment he spoke. “Potter knows he has to die if the Dark Lord is to be defeated. No doubt that has upset him.”

McGonagall gasped and Dumbledore frowned. “How can you be sure?”

“He brought the subject up in our last Legilimency lesson.”

Harry was surprised that Snape hadn’t told Dumbledore about that yet.

“But how did he find out?” asked McGonagall, despair in her voice. “I thought only the three of us knew, and you only just told me yesterday, Albus.”

“You say he brought it up during practicing Legilimency, Severus. Could he hav-”

“The idea that Potter breached my defences without me realising is ridiculous, Albus. Do not even suggest it. No, he was distracted from

the moment he walked in the door. If none of we three told him, then he must have overheard our conversation.”

Dumbledore frowned. “But how? I have already increased the wards around my office after the last breach.”

“I’ve no idea. I did not ask.”

“Why didn’t you say, Severus? If a student is able to eavesdrop on conversations had in this office, who else might be listening?” admonished McGonagall.

“Though he did not say it, I believe our conversation was one had in confidence.”

“No doubt the one between yourself and Albus was as well!”

Snape gave an almost indifferent shrug and turned to Dumbledore. “If that is all, Albus. I have things to do, potions to brew.”

Dumbledore’s lips twitched, and he nodded at Snape, who narrowed his eyes and swept from the room.

“Let us hope that Severus is right, Minerva. I am beginning to think he might be. After all, Harry has done this before.”

McGonagall nodded. “I’m worried too about how Harry found out. If it’s true that he overheard you and Severus, he could be listening to everything that goes on in here, hearing things he shouldn’t know. He could be listening right now!”

Dumbledore paused. “If he is Minerva, I’ve no doubt he has now realized the commotion and worry his disappearance has caused his friends and teachers, and I am sure he will reappear in time for his next lesson.”

Harry rolled his eyes, annoyed by the fact that he was planning on going to his next lesson. He was tempted not to go now, just to spite the manipulative old man.

Dumbledore left with McGonagall minutes later, and Harry was turning to leave when he decided to stay for a minute. He got as close to the canvas as he could without falling through, the new resistance helping him. Huddles against the edge of the frame so none of the portraits of previous headmasters saw him, he peered down at Dumbledore's office.

He wanted the Pendant back, but he had not so much as seen it since the night he had rescued Snape. He had a feeling Dumbledore must be keeping it close.

Annoyed that he hadn't brought his cloak with him, he resolved to bring it another time and get a closer look at the office.

...

He didn't attend his next class, or any others that week; he wouldn't give Dumbledore the satisfaction. Not that Dumbledore had actually known he was there listening. He still had the feeling that Dumbledore would get some sense of satisfaction from Harry turning up.

oOo

Harry was spending his Saturday morning on the lounge, reading through another book in the hopes it would give him a clue about Horcruxes. The book he was reading was full of terrible magic, but he gritted his teeth and scanned the disturbing text for information on the soul. The lack of information had not improved his disposition, and he was sitting in the near dark, gloomily reading in the light of a single candle.

He gave a start when the door to the courtyard opened suddenly, letting in bright morning sunlight. He jumped up, shielding his eyes and fumbling for his wand.

"It's just me, Potter," said an amused voice.



Harry dropped his hands, squinting. He resented the intrusion into his private space. Turning, he walked across the room and sat down in a chair near the fireplace.

Malfoy came to stand near him, not deterred by the lack of a proper greeting. After a few moments of uncomfortable scrutiny, Harry looked up at him and scowled. Malfoy spoke. "The school's been mad, everyone wondering where you've gotten to. Not just the school, either. The Daily Prophet ran an article suggesting you'd been kidnapped by Death Eaters. I knew you were just down here, of course. I wonder what everyone will say when I tell them you're just sulking? Imagine the Prophet's next headline, though! 'Boy-Who-Lived has bad day: Becomes Recluse.'" Malfoy gave a small chortle and flopped down on the armchair across from Harry.

"Yeah, well, not going to be the Boy-Who-Bloody-Lived for long," he muttered.

"Sorry, didn't quite catch that," said Malfoy cheerily.

Harry sneered.

To Harry's annoyance, Salz slithered down from Harry's chair and over to Malfoy's, curling up on the Slytherin's lap. "Traitor," he muttered, and then spoke to Malfoy. "Why are you so happy? Why are you talking to me? I thought you didn't want to associate anymore."

Malfoy shrugged casually. "It's like you said: no one is going to see us down here. Plus it's the fact that the Dark Lord thinks I'm so very loyal, so I don't think he's going to go looking through my mind for hidden deceits. And, if he does, well." Draco gave an arrogant shrug and inspected his fingernails. "I'm pretty damn good at Occlumency, really."

Harry marvelled at Malfoy's sudden and dramatic mood swing, but it didn't impress him and he was too concerned with other things to wonder or worry about it. "Maybe I don't want you here now."

Malfoy wagged a finger at Harry, and Harry had the insane urge to rip the irritating digit off with his teeth and spit it over the cliff. "Can't keep me out, though, can you?"

Harry clenched his jaw, his nostrils flaring in anger. "I found this place, it's mine. I don't want you here."

Malfoy became suddenly serious. He sat back with a small frown, cocking his head and peering intently at Harry. "What is wrong with you, Potter?"

Harry remained quiet, and Malfoy dropped the

"Look, it can't be that bad, whatever it is."

Harry didn't bother to respond. There was no way he could explain it to Malfoy.

Malfoy pursed his lips, letting the subject drop.

"Let's do something," he said after a long pause. "I want to go flying."

"Don't feel like it."

"So what? Are you just going to sit in her sulking for another week? A month? I'm sure if you get out and do something fun, whatever it is won't seem so big and terrible."

At that moment, a little head popped out of Malfoy's collar. At the sight of the small beige ferret, Harry couldn't help but laugh. He managed to keep it to a loud snort rather than an actual laugh, however. Malfoy narrowed his eyes, but said nothing. The hand that had been going up to pat the ferret dropped back to Malfoy's lap though.

Harry sat up. "Fine. Let's go flying then."

Malfoy grinned and tossed his hair. "Good." He stood and deposited Salz on the chair, and the snake curled up into a coil in the warm patch left by the Slytherin. Malfoy began to set Gaspard down on the

chair as well, but then thought better of it and put the ferret down on another chair instead. "Tell your snake not to eat my ferret."

Harry rolled his eyes. "He won't."

Malfoy scowled. "Just tell him."

"Salzzz," Harry droned. "Don't eat Gassspard." Salazar's tongue flickered at the air.

Malfoy narrowed his eyes as if he didn't quite trust what Harry had said, then led the way across the oval room.

They stepped out onto the courtyard, Harry blinking in the harsh light. His eyes were particularly sensitive after sitting in near dark for most of the week.

"Watch this." Malfoy left Harry near the edge of the drop and walked to the wall of the castle. When he got there, he turned around and came back. Rather than walking however, he ran flat out in Harry's direction. There was no way that he could stop at that speed, but it seemed that Malfoy had no intention of doing so.

He ran straight off the cliff. Or, rather, he took a running leap, flying up and out over the vast chasm beneath them. Malfoy reached a point, about two metres out from the courtyard's edge, where, to Harry's shocked eyes, he appeared to hang momentarily before plummeting downwards.

Harry leaned forward, eyes bulging as Malfoy fell faster and faster.

He was tiny when he finally transformed in mid air, slowing as he spread vast leathery orange wings and rising on an air current.

Harry stumbled back from the edge, tripping over his feet as he hurried to get to the wall. Once there, he turned and took one deep breath. Then, before he could think better of it, he followed Malfoy over the edge.

If anything would bring him out of his depressed stupor, then jumping off of a cliff was definitely it.

He did a bit of a flip in the air so that he was rocketing downwards headfirst, at an amazing pace. It was the scariest, most exhilarating thing he had ever done, and the adrenaline coursing through his veins brought him to life.

As he neared the water, it occurred to him that if he didn't transform he was going to die. The thought sent a thrill of fear through him, followed by a hot burst of anger. He didn't want to die – not now, not for a long time. He wasn't going to die, not if there was something he could do about it. And there had to be something.

Fifty metres from the water, he began to transform, and his belly brushed the water a split second later as he spread his great emerald-green wings.

The cold spray coming off the white water and the rushing wind was refreshing, and he found that he was enjoying himself for the first time all week.

He saw Malfoy's long barbed tail disappear around a bend in the canyon and took off, trying to catch up.

After a few minutes he did, and they exchanged a few comments about the weather.

He had a feeling the sentences and words he issued were not quite as complex as human words and sentences, but he understood perfectly what he was saying and could not think how exactly the two languages were different.

He didn't understand everything Draco's was saying either, but he got the general gist. It was like the language Malfoy was speaking was mostly the same, but slightly different to his.

They set down on the sandy bank where Harry had first seen Malfoy in his animagus form. The light barely reached this part of the canyon at this time of the day, so Harry transformed in an effort to keep warm.

He didn't know much about wyverns, but given their reptilian look, he assumed they were cold-blooded like snakes.

He looked up at Malfoy, surprised by how big the dragon looked now that Harry was in human form. It was a bit scary.

Malfoy looked down on him, and Harry could have sworn the dragon smirked. Seconds later, Malfoy was standing next to him in human form as well. "You look positively tiny from up there."

Malfoy sat down on a rock. "Feeling a bit more cheerful now?" he asked sarcastically, though his eyebrows were raised in expectation of an answer.

"Mm. A bit," Harry replied. And he was.

...

Harry dragged himself up to the Astronomy Tower at midnight that night, setting up his telescope next to Malfoy's. "First class you've come to all week," commented the Slytherin, not taking his eyes away from the telescope.

Harry shrugged. "First class you've seen me in."

Malfoy looked up then. "You've been going to classes in the paintings again? Don't you think hiding is a bit immature for someone our age?"

"I wasn't doing it because I was hiding, Malfoy. I was doing it because I didn't want to miss my classes."

"Did you think maybe the way to not miss them might be to actually come to them?"

Harry sighed. "Give it a rest, would you? I'm here now."

"Only because there's no paintings up here," said Malfoy, and then before Harry could respond the comment, "I take it your over whatever had you in a bad mood, then?"

Harry shrugged, adjusting the focus on his telescope. "Not over it, no. I guess I've just realised that if there isn't anything I can do about it, then there's no point worrying about it, and if I can do something about it, then I need to find out what, and worrying isn't going to help that either."

...

Harry left Astronomy and made his way to Gryffindor Tower. He was expecting it to be empty, but Ron was, like the last time Harry had returned late, sitting in front of a chess board with a look of deep concentration on his face. He seemed to be playing against himself this time though.

When he heard Harry's approaching footsteps, Ron's head shot up, a look of relief on his face. "Harry, mate! Where've you been?"

Harry held up his telescope. "Astronomy. You're up late."

"I was just about to head up, actually. You've just missed Mione." Though Harry hadn't really answered Ron's question, Ron didn't ask again, but his expression suddenly hardened slightly. "She's been really worried about you, you know."

Harry felt a stab of guilt. "Look, I'm sorry. Something happened and I needed some time to think about it. I'll tell you about it, I think, but not tonight."

Ron sighed and stood, then clapped Harry on the back. "Whatever. Just... next time you're thinking of disappearing on us, can you at least let us know beforehand? I won't ask questions if you don't want me to, but it would be good to know you haven't been murdered or something."

Harry gave a wry smile and they headed up the stairs to the dormitory.

oOo

The next evening after dinner Harry had a Legilimency lesson with Snape. He was wondering if Snape would say anything about Harry

having overheard the conversation between him and Dumbledore, and was in two minds about having said anything. On the one hand, they were now wondering how he had access to Dumbledore's office. On the other hand, it had been a relief to talk about what he'd heard, even if only briefly.

He walked in when Snape answered his knock, shutting the door quietly behind him.

"And where have you been?" asked Snape, his face blank.

Harry turned around and shrugged. "Brooding, feeling sorry for myself."

Snape narrowed his eyes at Harry. "I see. And whereabouts were you brooding and feeling sorry for yourself?"

"Does it matter? I didn't leave the castle. Anyway, I'm not worrying about it anymore. There's no point in worrying about things I can't change."

Then, after a long pause, Snape said something that made a balloon rise in Harry's chest.

"There may be another way."

oOo

Good, bad? Tragical, magical? Let me know in a review!

Thanks very muchly to those who reviewed the past chapter.

Forgotten Lake, pink-fogg, riddle\_.uk, tiny099, ams71080, cyiusblack, call015, Blah, La Mariane, nxkris, Kris, JonathLee, christoh13, Concealed Convict, sworbunny4486, FlamingThunder, Elfwyn, Slytherin66, loonyXtune, Badbonita

and

QuannanHade: I'm sorry! for not leaving a message at the end of the last chapter. I fully intended to, but then I went and posted without doing it... aagh! Anyway... as for your question about the paintings, you were sort of close on one point and not so close on another. Thanks again for the great review. : )



. o O o . 42 . o O o .

Fidelimency

Harry's head snapped up and his eyes became riveted on Snape.  
"Another way?"

"I was thinking about a comment you made in our last meeting."

Harry snorted, cutting Snape off. "You were thinking about something I said?"

Snape scowled.

"Sorry," muttered Harry, ducking his head.

"Much as I am disgusted to admit it, there are occasions – rare occasions – where you have the odd burst of intelligence and say something worth considering." Snape's lips quirked slightly.

Harry looked back up. arHarry "What did I say?"

'It was about the prophecy. It mentions you have some 'power he knows not.' Dumbledore's theory of destroying all the horcruxes has nothing whatsoever to do with you. It might if, for example, you were the only one who was capable of destroying them, but Dumbledore has shown that he can do it.'

"I thought you said that you didn't believe in prophecies?"

"I said they are notoriously unreliable. I prefer to focus on facts. That is not to say I have not... entertained the possibility that prophecies truly predict the future."

"So you think I can really defeat him?" Harry swallowed and waited nervously for an answer.

Snape frowned slightly. "He cannot exist forever. Sooner or later, someone will defeat him. Whether or not that someone is you remains to be seen."

“Oh.” It wasn’t exactly an encouraging answer.

“Er... so what is this other way?”

“Fidelimency.”

“Fidelimency?” repeated Harry blankly, feeling a sinking feeling. “That wouldn’t be anything like Occlumency and Legilimency would it?”

“Occlumency and Legilimency deal with the mind. Fidelimency goes deeper than the conscious mind, deeper than the subconscious. The art of Fidelimency draws you into the realms of the soul.”

“The soul... you want me to go into his soul?”

“The choice is yours. If you believe the prophecy speaks of you, if you do not wish to follow Dumbledore’s plan, you need another way. No one can best the Dark Lord in a duel, not anymore. If the Dark Lord is to be defeated, it will not be at the end of a wand.”

Harry expelled the breath he had been holding and slumped in his chair. The whole thing seemed so huge, so impossible. “So how does Fidelimency work? How long is it going to take me to learn it?”

Snape drummed his fingers on the desk and then reached down, pulling on the handle of a desk drawer. He muttered an unlocking charm and it sprung open. He pulled out a book and handed it to Harry.

“Do not let anyone see you with this book. It has been passed down through my mother’s family for centuries. Merlin knows who wrote it, but it is one of very few written works on Fidelimency. It is not even especially factual or detailed, mostly hypothetical and theoretical, but it is all we have to go on.”

Harry took the small, but heavy book from Snape. It was old, the faded leather dry and brittle. There was no title.

“I suggest you read this, rather than me explaining it to you. In our next lesson we can discuss anything you do not understand.”

Harry nodded and opened the book to find that it was entirely handwritten, the script neat, but dense and difficult to read. The pages were yellowed with age, showing evidence of water damage.

“Is Fidelimency the same as Legilimency – do you get in by looking in their eyes?”

Snape gave a wry smirk. “Of course. The eyes are the doorways to the soul, Mr. Potter. Even the muggles know that.”

...

After practicing Legilimency for a while, Harry went back to Gryffindor Tower. He had been fully intending to sit down and read the section on Fidelimency straight through, but when he pulled the curtains around his bed and opened up the book to see the cramped lines of tiny writing, he was overcome by a sense of despair.

He sighed and stared unseeingly at the page for a while before snapping it closed and stowing the book in his trunk.

oOo

Sunlight was streaming into the hall as Harry sat eating breakfast surrounded by his friends. A cool breeze was blowing from somewhere, probably the Entrance Hall, and the ceiling of the hall was a dazzlingly clear blue.

Ron and Hermione were giving each other secret smiles as they ate their breakfast, and the hall was filled with the sounds of happily chatting students. Hedwig gave him an affectionate nip.

Harry tried to swallow the tightness that had suddenly formed in his throat, and he felt a sting in his eyes. He blinked furiously.

Surely he wasn't about to cry in the middle of breakfast? Why was he even upset? He let out a choked sort of giggle, earning a confused look from Ron and Hermione.

He blushed and stood up quickly. "I'll see you in defence."

He rushed out of the Great Hall and hurried towards the third floor. The defence classroom was empty and he sat down in his usual spot and tried to get himself under control. He took several deep breaths and shook his head, feeling slightly silly for being so emotional.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of footsteps outside the classroom. He wiped his eyes hurriedly and sniffed.

Snape entered the classroom, stopping on catching sight of Harry and raising an eyebrow. "Potter, a little eager aren't you? Class does not start for ten minutes." He moved again, setting down a stack of marked assignments on the desk.

Harry shrugged.

Snape frowned and walked over, where he stood in front of the desk looking down his nose at Harry. "What is the matter?"

Harry averted his eyes, uncomfortably aware that Snape must have noticed their redness. He cleared his throat. "Nothing. Just thinking."

"Thinking," drawled Snape. "I see. Wonders never cease."

With that, he turned away and strode to the desk at the front, flipping open a textbook and copying something down on a parchment.

By the time students started to file in to the classroom and the class began, Harry was feeling a bit more normal, and wondering what exactly had set him off.

...

After defence, he and Hermione left Ron and went to charms, where they received their major project for the year.

“As seventh years charms students you are required to invent your own spell,” squeaked Flitwick enthusiastically, his mop of curly white hair bobbing around as he bounced up and down on his toes while he spoke.

Beside Harry, Hermione shifted excitedly.

“You cannot choose to create a charm for which a finite incantation has the same effect, the reason being that those charms are too simplistic. In previous years, the majority of students choose to replicate an already existing spell. As you know, there are dozens of cleaning spells which all have similar effects. This is because they are relatively simple, and therefore there are many incantations and wand movement combinations that will produce a satisfactory result.”

Flitwick flicked his wand and assignment sheets flew to everyone in the class. “Of course, some students prefer to go beyond such simple spells and create a more complicated spell. The choice is yours.”

Harry looked over the piece of parchment detailing the assignment.

### Spell Invention

You are required to create a spell, documenting the invention process and any hurdles you encountered along the way. An essay is to be handed in after demonstration of a successful spell.

Include in your analysis the purpose and nature of the spell, and the methods used to determine wand movement and incantation.

“This is a time consuming assignment and will require you to do some self study in order to learn the basics required in creating a spell, so I do not expect you to actually start creating the spell for a few months yet.”

Harry listened to Hermione chatter on about the task as they made their way down to lunch.

“It’ll be such an advantage having done arithmancy. There are certain arithmetic combinations that describe a wand movement. For some simpler spells, you can get a result with practically any wand movement. The more complex the spell, the more specific the wand movement. Just think how many cleaning spells there are, like Flitwick said. Dozens and dozens, and they all have simple wand movements. When you get into things like healing magic, you get really complicated wand movements.”

“I guess this means I have to learn a bit of arithmancy then?”

Hermione nodded. “For the level of spell we’re supposed to create, I think the basics will do. For example, it’s easy to describe a straight line or circle. You can use runes as well. The wand movement for Wingardium Leviosa is an inversion of the rune for heavy.”

Harry frowned thoughtfully, trying to recall the rune. “Oh yeah, it is too. I’ve never noticed that until now.”

They sat down at the Gryffindor Table for lunch, and were greeted by Ron. “Arry, whe’ oo oo wan’ ‘ava eea eeing?”

Harry chuckled. “Sorry Ron, didn’t quite catch that.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I think what he wants to know is when you want to schedule the first DA meeting.”

Ron swallowed loudly. “Yeah, I was thinking this weekend after Quidditch tryouts, what do you reckon?”

“Quidditch tryouts, yeah. I’d completely forgotten about them.” In fact, he’d completely forgotten the DA too.

“I don’t reckon they’ll be too long, seeing as we’ve still got all our team from last year except for Katie, and everyone knows Seamus’ll get that spot. It’s really just a formality.”

Harry quirked an eyebrow at Ron’s big word, but his unasked question was answered by Hermione leaning over and whispering in his ear. “McGonagall’s words.”

Harry smiled and nodded to Ron, who was looking suspiciously between them. "Yeah, after Quidditch sounds great. We'll have to have a talk about what you guys covered last year and what we're going to do this time."

After lunch they headed up to transfiguration, sorting themselves out while Professor McGonagall called the roll. When she was finished, she called, "Harry Potter, stay behind when the class is finished."

Harry wrinkled his nose as McGonagall proceeded to read aloud their instructions. He should have known he wouldn't be lucky enough to get away with missing nearly a week of classes so early into the term.

Harry hung around McGonagall's desk when the class was finished, sitting down when McGonagall nodded pointedly at a chair."

"You will serve a week's worth of detentions with me for skipping classes."

Harry nodded glumly.

"I don't want to see it happen again. A person of your age should be acting more maturely."

"Yes Professor."

"Good..."

To Harry's surprise, Professor McGonagall pulled a tartan patterned biscuit tin from under her desk and opened it, offering it to Harry. "Now, as for other matters, how are you feeling?" She shook the tin, so he plucked out a few biscuits.

Harry frowned. "What other matters?"

"Some of your other teachers have told me you seem distracted, unhappy. The school has a solid emotional support system, available to all students at all times."

Harry felt himself redden and hoped Snape hadn't told McGonagall about him crying. "I'm fine, Professor, really."

She pursed her lips. "The system is here to be use, Mr. Potter, and after hearing the information that has recently come to light, I daresay you are feeling some inner turmoil."

McGonagall's face softened, and Harry was sure a tear glinted in her eye.

"I don't really know what I'm supposed to say here, Professor. It isn't really something I want to talk about."

McGonagall gave a small sigh. "Very well, I can see you won't be persuaded to discuss this. If you change your mind, you don't have to talk to me. If there is another teacher you feel more comfortable speaking with, Professor Snape, perh-

Harry snorted at the thought, cutting her off. He grinned. "If I need to, I'll come and talk to you, Professor."

With an amused smile, McGonagall waved him from her office.

...

That night Harry disappeared under his invisibility cloak and went down to the chamber. In his bag he had the book Snape had given him to read. He closed the curtains so he wasn't distracted by the view, and told Salz to go hunting.

Then, alone in the quiet, he opened the book to the pages Snape had bookmarked for him.

The art of Fidelimency predates Occlumency and is thought to have been discovered accidentally by a wizard during the practice of Legilimency.

Given the unstable nature, complexity and difficulty of soul magic, Fidelimency has received little attention save for the occasional debate about the ethics of the art. Some councils around the country



have classified it as Dark Magic and banned its use among the general population.

Some claim that Fidelimency serves no real purpose; once the soul is accessed, there is no evidence that anything can actually be done to either help or harm the soul.

The incantation to access the soul is the same as the incantation used by a Legilimens accessing the mind of another. Once the mind has been penetrated however, the process differs somewhat...

oOo

Harry was woken by light shining in the window, and realised he had fallen asleep on the lounge, the book still propped open on his lap. Yawning, he closed it and looked at his watch. Luckily he hadn't overslept, and he made his way down to breakfast.

The Great Hall was filled with unusually raucous conversations, and Harry soon discovered the reason. He sat down at the table and Hermione promptly shoved a copy of the Daily Prophet in front of him. A large picture of a handsome, aristocratic man covered most of the front page, with a short paragraph beneath it.

## THORNE IN THE MINISTRY'S SIDE

International political advisor Septimus Thorne was yesterday voted in as the 46th Minister for Magic in a furious and hard-fought election campaign.

Thorne is held in high regard by a high number of Ministry officials, not just from our own Ministry, but from those he has dealt with in his post as a political advisor.

Among the ministers plans are the promise to increase public safety and develop international relations. Former minister Cornelius Fudge has given the new minister his blessing, lauding Thorne's illustrious career and experience.

Runner-up Kingsley Shacklebolt lost by only a small percentage of votes.

“This is ridiculous!” hissed Harry quietly, anger building as he stared at the smug expression on Septimus Thorne’s face. “A Death Eater in charge of the entire Ministry, just what we need!”

“He can’t do much when he’s just been given the position; people will be watching him too closely.”

“Yeah, but he’s got to appoint ministers, doesn’t he?” said Ron. “And we know who he’s going to pick. The ministry’s already full of scumbags in top positions, now they’ll be Death Eater scum.”

...

Harry was sitting quietly in his bed finishing a bit of potions work, listening to the not so quiet snoring of his dorm mates. He scratched out one last sentence and put the parchment aside, revealing the Half-Blood Prince’s copy of their text. He hardly used it in his classes now, as they had moved on to the seventh-year text book, but it was still useful to have around.

He thumbed through the pages until he came to the one where the Levicorpus spell was written. After considering for a second, he pulled out his wand.

Flicking it toward Ron’s bedside table, he thought, ‘Levicorpus.’ Evidently he had misjudged direction in the dark, because there was a surprised grunt and then a yell, and Ron was suddenly dangling in the air, his limbs flailing.

“Spiders! Spiders got me! Agh!”

Harry laughed as Ron struggled against whatever was holding Ron up. “Hang on, hang on! There’s no spiders, Ron.”

The other boys were stirring, woken by Ron’s yells. “What’s going on?” asked Seamus sleepily, and then laughed at seeing Ron hanging upside down in the dark.

Harry scanned the page and found there was a counter-curse. Aiming his wand at Ron, he flicked his wand again and Ron landed with a thump on the bed. "Urgh!"

"Brilliant, Harry," chuckled Seamus as he settled back down.

Harry snapped the book closed and scrambled off the bed, sitting down on the edge of Ron's. "Sorry Ron, it was completely by accident."

"Merlin's balls, Harry," groaned Ron. "There are easier ways to wake someone up."

Harry grinned. "But they aren't as entertaining."

Ron let out a snort. "Yeah well, you can shove off now. Let a man get some sleep." Ron punched Harry on the arm and flopped back on the pillows. "What spell was that anyway?"

"I'll tell you about it tomorrow. I found it in a potions textbook."

" 'Kay..." muttered Ron sleepily, and he was snoring again before Harry even got back to his own bed.

oOo

Quidditch practices were held on Saturday morning, and as Ron had said, they were mostly formality. The chaser position did end up going to Seamus, who'd been trying out since second year.

After arranging their first practice for the next week, Harry and Ron went straight to the Room of Requirement to set up for the D.A. Hermione was already there, setting out cushions around the room.

They had decided to go over the basics during the first meeting, as they were expecting a fair number of new people to turn up, including a lot of new first years.

It was going to be more difficult to plan meetings now that they had a decent defence teacher. Before, when Umbridge had been the defence professor, the sixth and seventh year students hadn't been that far ahead of second and third year students. Now, there was a distinct difference in skill level between all the years.

"I think we're going to have to divide it up a bit, maybe have first to third years together, fourth and fifth years, and then sixth and seventh years. Otherwise it's going to be too difficult keeping track of what everyone's doing."

Ron and Hermione nodded in agreement. "I think we should try and teach the same thing to everyone as well, at least as much as possible."

"Mm, yeah, that's true too. I think I have some ideas for what we can work on next week."

At eleven, students started to file in, and by quarter past the room was filled with about fifty students.

"Biggest turnout we've had in a while," said Ron with a grin, nudging Harry. "Looks like a famous face was needed to draw in the crowds, eh?"

Harry rolled his eyes as Hermione called for quiet.

When the gathered students had quieted, Harry stood up at the front and spoke. "Er... it's good to see so many people here, so thanks for coming. This week we won't be learning anything new, since we don't know where everyone is up to in class. If everyone divides up into their year groups and starts working on what they're learning in class at the moment, me and Ron and Hermione'll come around to see where everyone's at. Next week we'll have some new things for everyone to try."

Chatter broke out as the students grouped up, and he Ron and Hermione began to spread between them to find out what level everyone was at.

...

Harry dressed warmly to go to Astronomy that night. It was unseasonably chilly, but he had a new cloak that kept the wind out nicely.

To his surprise, he was the first one there, and he supposed the other students were also reluctant to venture out into the cold at midnight on the weekend.

Malfoy turned up five minutes later and gave a brief jerk of his head in greeting.

It was too windy for them to talk without being noticed, so they worked in silence.

An hour later, the professor called an end to the class and everyone began to pack up. Harry and Malfoy went silently down the staircase and into the corridor.

Harry looked around to make sure no one was within earshot, but at this late hour, there was no one wandering the corridors and the other Astronomy students were still packing up. "Want to go flying?"

Malfoy cast him a sideways glance, his face impassive. He seemed to be considering his answer.

Finally he heaved a sigh and shook his sleeve back, grimacing at his watch. "Yeah, I do." He sped up abruptly, taking the quickest route to the chamber.

Once they reached Myrtle's bathroom and started down the damp steps, Malfoy seemed to loosen up a bit, and started talking.

"I've been meaning to ask you, Potter – how did we apparate out of the castle that night? It's not supposed to be possible."

Harry considered not answering, but Malfoy had made an unbreakable vow and couldn't pass on anything he learned in the Chamber anyway. "I found a Pendant down here last year. It let me

apparate anywhere I wanted within the castle. It let me apparate through the wards as well, but it drains you magically when you do that. That's why I needed to take you with me, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to get back."

Malfoy frowned. "It'd have to be pretty powerful to get through the castle's wards."

"Well it was made by Slytherin, and I guess he'd have been one of the people who put up the initial wards, so it was probably fairly easy for him to get around them, if he knew exactly what they were."

Malfoy nodded. "I suppose that's true. Can I see it?"

Harry scowled darkly. "I don't have it anymore. It got confiscated, and I have no idea where it's being kept."

Malfoy scoffed. "I can't believe you let something like that get confiscated!"

"I didn't let it get confiscated. I was unconscious when Dumbledore took it, same as you were after you apparated us out of the castle."

"Oh. Does he know what it does?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't think he knows how it works, at least, he didn't when he asked me about it, but that was a while ago now. For all I know, he's figured it out by now."

"If I were you, I'd try to get it back."

"I'm planning on it, I just need to find out where he's keeping it first. If he wears it, I have no idea how I can get it."

They dropped their bags in the chamber library and went straight out to the courtyard.

The air was cold as they stood on the edge of the cliff, and even colder as Harry plummeted downwards towards the black river. He

transformed much sooner than he had last time; he wasn't game to wait very long when he couldn't see the river.

His senses sharpened in his wyvern form, and he saw that the river was still a fair way below him. He spun in the air, rapidly changing direction and flying back towards the castle.

Harry soared between the turrets of the castle, then came to rest on the steep side of one of them, one bony claw wrapped around the spire and the other clutching at the shingles.

There was a clatter as Malfoy landed on the nearest tower and dislodged some shingles, which rattled down the tower and fell, shattering on the battlements.

"Nice one, destroy the castle," he hissed.

A small snort of flame erupted in Harry's direction and he dropped off the spire to get out of the way, giving a hiss in Malfoy's direction. He couldn't seem to make very loud noises, or perhaps he just hadn't worked out how to use his vocal chords properly yet. "Why did you do that!? You nearly burned me!"

"No I didn't."

Harry felt his anger rise. "Yes, you did."

"I was just testing out my flame. I haven't had a chance to try it on a moving target yet. Besides, you got out of the way in time."

Harry took off with Malfoy close behind, occasionally blowing a wall of flame at him. Although Harry knew Malfoy wasn't really trying to get him, it was still a pretty scary experience. Luckily he was faster than Malfoy, so it wasn't that difficult to keep out of range anyway.

It was past three in the morning by the time Harry got back to the Tower. Malfoy had disappeared somewhere about half an hour previously and Harry had spent a while swooping over the Black Lake, watching fish scatter as he drug his feet through the still waters, before returning wet and cold to the castle.

He was asleep before his head hit the pillow, and being so tired, he completely forgot to clear his mind...

oOo

Hello! I hope everyone enjoyed this chapter. I'm a bit undecided as to whether I like it or not. Please review and let me know what you think of the story. I'd like to point out again that there will be no slash in this story, not between Harry and Draco or Harry and Snape or any other of those other combos people like. Sorry to disappoint anyone. We have reached 600 reviews! Three cheers for Solomon... yaaaay. Unfortunately he won't be reading this for a while, since it wasn't the last chapter he reviewed on, but oh well.

Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter Badbonita, cyiusblack, nxkris, crimzin-shinobi, La Mariane, purpleflyingmonkeys, ams71080, pink-fogg, Concealed Convict, Persidie, LoonyXtune, BadGirlgoesworse, Forgotten Lake, Lepton, tanith-4486, Nights Silhouette, christoh13, PhoenixFlight72, fhippogriff, Slytherin66, Elfwyn, Solomon

and

Kris: Thanks for reviewing : )

QuannanHade: Yeah, I've been neglecting uni work... ah well. Hehe you're review made me laugh.

^^: Wow! That definitely makes me feel good. Thanks for the encouraging review : )

Gypsy Peanut: That's a really interesting idea you have, I like it. I never even thought of something like that. Thanks so much for reviewing!



## Better to be Uncertain

"No one is as faithful as your mind tells me you are, Severus. Except perhaps dear Bellatrix." He inclined his head towards a hooded figure in the circle, one smaller than the rest. "The others in this circle have reason to be loyal; Lucius," he extended his hand toward a figure to his left, "Has his family, for whom he would do anything. Septimus and Yaxley have their positions, for which they will be eternally grateful to me. Rabastan, Rodolphus and Dolohov have shown their loyalty through a decade in Azkaban."

Voldemort paused, considering his next words. "Yet when I consider you, Severus, I see no reason why you are loyal to me. I see you, the only half-blood in the Inner Circle, one of the most intelligent men I have ever met, and I must question why you pledge your loyalty to me. I know perhaps the reasons you had when first you came to me as nothing more than a boy. But now..."

Again he paused, his eyes staring straight into Snape's as if he were trying desperately to see everything in the Potion Master's mind.

"The more I thought on it, the more I began to suspect that you have been walking a different path to the one you led me to believe, a path you long ago began to tread. Again and again I have waved aside actions you have taken as something other than deceit. How you aided in thwarting me when I possessed Quirrell's body, how you saved the life of Harry Potter when Quirrell tried to unseat him from his broom. Well to I recall how you begged me to spare the life of that mudblood. You were only too happy to watch her husband and child burn, but her... her you wished spared. And now you are protecting her son."

He said the last sentence with conviction, disgusted pitying conviction. His pale, spidery hand grasped Snape's jaw, holding it in a cold hard grip. "Am I right, Severus?" he hissed, the fury building again. "Do I speak the truth?"

"No! No, my Lord!"

“Rise and shine, it’s morning time.”

“My Lord, pl-”

“Rise and shine, it’s morning time!”

Harry’s mind slowly returned to consciousness as the annoying buzz of the clock Hermione had brought Ron one Christmas announced that it was time to get up.

It wasn’t the first time he had dreamed of that night, but it was the first time he had woken up and the memory hadn’t fled his mind.

“Bloody thing!” complained Ron groggily. “It’s Sunday morning!”

The other boys quickly fell asleep again, but Harry was wide awake now, the remembered night on his mind.

Logically, it seemed that the ‘mudblood’ Voldemort had referred to was his mother. After all, Snape was protecting him, in a way, and had saved his life before.

He didn’t know what he was supposed to do now, though. He felt that what Voldemort had said was somehow important, but Snape had already admitted to Harry that he had been friends with his mother.

Harry couldn’t fathom how Snape could have asked Voldemort to spare the life of a muggleborn and lived to tell about it. It didn’t really seem the sort of thing that Voldemort would tolerate.

Of course, he hadn’t granted the request, and perhaps Snape has suffered some punishment for asking.

Slipping into some muggle clothes, Harry left the castle and walked down to the lake, where he began a slow jog to clear his mind.

...

Later at breakfast, Harry was telling Ron about the spells he had learned in the Half-Blood Prince's book. The redhead was impressed with the Levicorpus spell Harry had accidentally cast on him, and was already planning on using it against the Slytherins.

Ron was speculating on what the other spells were for, and was on to the Sectumsempra spell.

"Maybe it's a defensive spell for duelling or something," suggested Ron, as a rushing sound filled the air and a hundred owls soared into the room. Hedwig dropped down next to Harry's plate.

"Yeah, probably is," he agreed, in response to Ron statement. Hedwig had a white envelope tied to her leg, and Harry removed it while she helped herself to a piece of bacon off the platter. It was from Aislinn. He tucked the letter away to read later.

"We should try it out sometime; not on each other, in case it's something nasty. I don't fancy having newts crawling out of my ears or anything like that."

Harry choked on his cereal, remembering the time Ron's wand had backfired, resulting in the redhead coughing up slugs.

Finishing their breakfast, they stood and left the hall.

"Where's Hermione, anyway?" asked Harry as they headed back to the Tower.

"Library. Something about an Ancient Runes essay. Ten o'clock on a Sunday morning, I tell you..." Ron trailed off, shaking his head.

"Hey, Potter!"

Harry and Ron stopped, turning to see a group of Slytherins approaching, headed by Malfoy.

"What do you want Malfoy?" spat Ron, glaring at the group.

Malfoy shifted his eyes briefly over to Ron. "None of your concern, Weasley." His eyes moved back to Harry. "Potter?" He turned and walked away, stopping out of hearing range.

"I'll be right back," said Harry, and then followed after the Slytherin.

"Can we go down to the chamber? I left my bag there last night," stated Malfoy as soon as Harry approached.

Harry glanced back the way he had been going. "Do you really need it right now? I'm busy."

Malfoy sneered. "Doing what? Quidditch practice isn't on because of the rain and if you had any sense you'd have done any homework you had yesterday."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Speaking like that isn't going to get you what you want."

Malfoy narrowed his eyes, but after a moment he visibly backed down. "Look, I really need it, and you only need to go as far as the bathroom. I can get out by myself."

"You can get in by yourself too," he pointed out.

Malfoy pursed his lips. "I wouldn't want to go all the way around the castle, just to transform and fly up to the courtyard even if it wasn't raining. The entrance is practically on your way anyway."

"The long way." Harry sighed. "Fine, just give me a second."

"Tell Weasley I was passing a message on for Snape or something."

Harry did exactly that, telling Ron, who was glaring at Blaise Zabini, "I have to go see Snape about something. I'll see you back in the common room when I get back."

Ron pushed himself off of the wall where he had been leaning, gestured rudely at Zabini, and nodded. "Okay, see you soon. Oi, Dean!" Ron ran to catch up with Seamus and Dean, who were further

down the corridor, and Harry went back to Malfoy. The rest of the Slytherins had gone off somewhere, probably on Malfoy's order, so they headed down to the chamber, walking apart because there were students wandering through the corridors.

Down in the chamber, Malfoy picked up his bag and slung the strap over his shoulder. Harry grabbed his too.

They headed towards the passageways and walked until they came to the bit where it split into the tunnels leading to Snape's chambers, the classroom and the Slytherin common room. Malfoy made to go down the one to the common room, but Harry stopped him. "No, let's go this way. There's something I want to show you."

Malfoy gave a long-suffering sigh, but turned down the passage that led to Snape's chambers and the waterfall painting.

When they reached it, Harry stepped in first.

"How does it feel to you, when you step into the painting?" he asked when Malfoy had joined him.

Malfoy shrugged. "It doesn't feel like anything. There's the initial push against the canvas and weird tingle that feels like magic when you step through. Why?"

"How hard is it for you to step through the canvas?"

"Not hard at all. It's not much harder than stepping through water." Malfoy glanced over. "Why?"

Harry frowned, and was silent for a moment before answering. "It's gotten harder for me. When I came back this year I noticed it. Before, it was easy to get into the paintings. Now, I have to really push to get through."

Malfoy ran his fingers along the canvas as they walked along through the painting, tapping it in thought. "Is it just this year?"

"I think so."

They walked in silence for a while, heading towards the painting in Malfoy's room.

"Could it have something to do with not having that Pendant anymore?"

Harry nodded. "That's what I was thinking too, but I don't see why it would make a difference. You can get through perfectly fine without it."

Malfoy turned a proud smirk on Harry. "Maybe it's because you aren't a Slytherin. I doubt Slytherin would have wanted silly Gryffindor students getting around in his chamber. Perhaps the Pendant was like some sort of pass; as well as letting you pass through the castle's wards, it let you pass through whatever barriers Salazar Slytherin put around the chamber and the paintings."

"But I can still get in, it's just more difficult." 'Ah,' said a little voice in the back of Harry's mind. 'But not all of you is a Gryffindor. Maybe it's not letting you in – maybe it's letting him in.'

Harry pushed the thought aside, but Malfoy reinforced the niggling voice with his next comment.

"You did say last year that the Hat wanted you in Slytherin. Completely ridiculous if you ask me, seeing as you're a complete Gryffindor, but the Hat's supposed to know what it's doing. So, you can get in because part of you is a Slytherin, but some of you, most if you ask me, isn't, and the barrier resists that part."

"Yeah, could be," muttered Harry, not wanting to continue the conversation anymore. Fortunately they had arrived at the portrait in Malfoy's room.

"So I can really get out of the paintings by just falling out?"

"Mhm," confirmed Harry.

"It's pretty high," said Malfoy in a dubious tone, looking down from near the edge of the painting.

"You do play Quidditch, don't you?"

"Yes, Potter, but I don't throw myself off the broom from great heights." Malfoy cast him a withering glance.

Harry grinned. "You threw yourself off a cliff the other day, pretty easily. Anyway, don't worry, it's not as high as it looks. It's just because we're smaller than usual. As soon as you're out of the painting, you'll be back to normal size."

"Hm." Malfoy braced a hand against the side of the frame and stepped up onto the frame that ran along the bottom.

His face scrunched up, Malfoy leaned into the canvas and then fell through into his room.

The change in size upset his sense of balance, and he hit the floor hard, stumbling and falling in an ungainly fashion.

"Very elegant," laughed Harry, earning a glare from Malfoy.

Malfoy stuck up his middle finger as he pulled himself to his feet and brushed invisible lint off of his robes. "Shut it Potter."

Harry laughed again and went to leave. He walked around the arm chair in the painting and headed towards the barrier between the next painting and the one he was in.

Just as he was about to jump through, he noticed a door set in the back wall. He walked back over to the canvas.

"Hey Malfoy, who is this portrait of?"

"I thought you were going," said Malfoy, looking up from where he was digging around in his bag. "It's a portrait of my grandfather."

Harry wrinkled his nose. "Why do you have a portrait of your grandfather in your room?"

"Originally it was in the trophy room, because he made a large donation to the school. When I moved in here," Malfoy waved his hand around the room, "someone thoughtfully sent it up."

"Huh."

"Not that it matters; he's rarely ever here, and when he is all he does is make snide comments about my study habits, cleaning habits, sleeping habits.... everything and anything, really. I don't see him too often though, as he's usually to be found hanging around in a painting on the fifth floor, trying to seduce wood nymphs." Malfoy grimaced.

"Are there any other paintings of him anywhere in the castle?"

Malfoy huffed. "No, there isn't. What is the point of these questions, Potter? I have things I need to do." Malfoy shook a bunch of parchment he was holding at Harry.

"If you had any sense you'd have done all your homework yesterday."

The Slytherin scowled.

Harry continued. "Are there any other portraits of him anywhere?"

Malfoy threw up his arms in exasperation. "I don't know – yes. We have one in the manor and there's one at the Ministry. Is that the last question?"

Harry smiled brightly. "Yep, bye." With that, he leapt through the barrier, focussing on the painting he wanted. He appeared in a painting just around the corner from the portrait of the Fat Lady, in a dark corridor no one had any reason to go down.

He fell forward through the canvas and landed with more balance than Malfoy had, easily staying on his feet.



Walking around the corner, he told the password to the Fat Lady and entered the Gryffindor Common Room.

...

That night Harry headed down to the dungeons for his Legilimency lesson with Snape. He took the book Snape had lent him the previous lesson, the one that had information on Fidelimency.

“Harry

HaGH“I imagine you have some questions?” asked Snape once they were both seated.

Harry nodded.

“Dumbledore said that Vold - the Dark Lord,” he amended, when Snape flinched— “created all those horcruxes. You said the soul is accessed by the eyes, but if his soul is in all those pieces, how will eye contact help me get at the ones not in his body?”

Snape waved his hand. “I am not entirely sure what a broken soul looks like, but I do know that it is, in some way, still connected. He may have stored each part in those different objects, but he still only has one soul. As such, accessing one part of his soul gives you the means of reaching the other parts.”

Harry didn’t really understand, but he would take Snape at his word.

“You said no one can best him in a duel, but that’s what it’s going to come to if I’m standing in front of him trying to perform soul magic on him.”

Snape nodded once. “That is where I believe the prophecy comes into it. If the Headmaster is correct, the Dark Lord is unaware that you are a horcrux. The fact that you are a horcrux is what puts you in the unique position to attack the Dark Lord from a distance. My theory has no basis in experience or fact, but if you are able to enter the Dark Lord’s mind from a distance, then why not his soul? After all, Fidelimency is merely a deeper form of Legilimency.”

"But if I'm connected to him through his soul, why have I ever only been in his body? Why not the horcruxes? Maybe I can't get into the other horcruxes."

Snape's forehead creased as he considered the question. "The Headmaster believes that the snake Nagini is a horcrux. Last year, you saw an attack through her eyes, did you not?"

Harry frowned. "Yes, but-"

"Apart from Nagini, the other horcruxes," continued Snape, "are objects, or so Professor Dumbledore believes. I concur, given the risk of holding a piece of one's soul in another living being. If Nagini were to die, that piece of his soul will be lost forever. Given that the other horcruxes are objects, you won't be able to see what they see or think what they think, because they do not think or see. Another explanation is that you do not have access to them. The Dark Lord will have them well hidden behind extremely powerful wards and traps. Indeed, it took great effort on the Headmaster's part to obtain the ring."

"The diary wasn't protected by anything," replied Harry.

Snape's long finger tapped against his lips as he surveyed Harry. "Perhaps..." he said slowly, thinking. "The diary was blank, was it not? Perhaps for that reason, you never gained anything from it."

"I don't really understand all this," said Harry reluctantly. He got the basic gist of it all, but he couldn't imagine how it was all going to actually work.

Snape waved the statement aside dismissively. "I doubt there is anyone who really does. Fidelimancy is a lost art, and it has never been common. Any magic involving the soul is considered Dark Magic, and therefore illegal.

"Illegal? What would happen if someone found out we were doing it?"

“No one will find out, Potter, because you are not going to tell anyone. Is that quite understood?”

Harry shrugged, but then agreed when Snape glared. “Yes sir... What happens once we destroy the horcruxes, and the bit of soul in his body? Will he be dead?”

“If we destroy his soul, I imagine he will not pass on to whatever awaits us when we die. He will simply cease to exist. It is similar, I believe, to the Dementor’s Kiss.”

Harry scowled. “That isn’t fair – he should rot in hell!” he spat vehemently.

Snape raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps you are right. If that is what you prefer, you may wish to pursue Dumbledore’s method. I believe that will have the desired result, provided someone can actually manage to kill him once all of the horcruxes are destroyed.”

Harry sighed. “Sorry... um, how do I actually destroy his soul once I’m there? And what will happen to me if I’m in his soul when that happens?”

Snape leaned forward, clasping his hands on the desk in front of him and eyeing Harry seriously. “That I cannot answer. In Legilimency, if the person being legilimised is killed, there is no effect upon the Legilimens, apart from being rather forcefully thrust back into their own mind and point of view. It can be a little uncomfortable, but never dangerous. I can only guess that Fidelimency is the same, but I will not, as I could just as easily be wrong.”

Harry nodded slowly. “So there’s a chance I could still die if we do this?”

“Yes,” said Snape quietly. “There is still a chance.”

“What does a soul look like?”

“Again, I cannot answer that. I have read the book I gave you several times, and I believe I am ready to attempt to access a soul. If you

choose this course of action, I will have at least some fore-knowledge to help you.”

“Will he know I’m in his soul? Could he throw me out?”

Snape contemplated for a while before he answered. “We are conscious of our own thoughts, so if someone else is in your thoughts, you are therefore conscious of them.” Snape frowned thoughtfully. “Whether or not we are conscious of our soul is a different matter. Given what happens when a soul is taken by a dementor most wizards, and muggles for that matter, believe that a person’s soul is their very being, their life. I am most certainly aware that I am alive, but that could be because my mind tells me so.”

They sat in silence for several minutes before Harry thought of another question. “Will we have to destroy the bit of soul in his body last? Because if we do, then I might not still have a link to him if we destroy the bit of soul that’s in me first.”

Snape nodded. “That is something to consider. We have much to learn before we can even contemplate attacking the Dark Lord in this matter.”

“I don’t think I have any more questions.”

Snape sat back. “You must understand that magic of this nature requires a great deal of trust. If you would prefer it, perhaps the Headmaster would be better suited to teaching you.”

Harry snorted. “I trust you a hell of a lot more than I trust him. I have for a while now.”

Harry shrugged at Snape’s surprised expression. “You’ve never lied to me, at least not about anything directly concerning me. At least I don’t think you have. Surely you’ve noticed I’m not particularly happy with Dumbledore lately.”

“I admit I have noticed a change in your relationship.”

Harry nearly rolled his eyes at the understatement. "Yeah well, you probably know better than me how much he's lied to me." Harry frowned. "Have you told him about this?"

"No, I have not. I believe this is your decision to make and I wanted there to be no influence from him. If you choose not to do this, he does not have to know. Keep in mind that we do not even know if this will work."

Harry nodded slowly. "I w-"

Snape held up his hand to stop Harry. "I do not want to hear your decision now. I want you to go away and seriously think about it. It is good that you had all these questions. Now that they are, to the best of my knowledge, answered, you need to consider the answers. Weigh up the risks between this way and the Headmaster's plan."

Harry nodded again.

"We do not have time for a Legilimency lesson tonight. I shall see you at the usual time on Monday evening. You may go."

Harry looked at the clock and saw that it was nearly ten. He left, his mind swirling with the conversation he had just had.

He was pretty sure he knew which way he wanted to go. Dumbledore's plan seemed not to be in order with the prophecy, and ended with Harry being dead. Snape's plan was uncertain, but Harry would take uncertain death over certain death any day.

...

Back in the Tower, Harry changed into his pyjamas and drew the curtains around his bed so that the light didn't wake his dorm mates. He wandlessly cast a lumos, noting with satisfaction that it was now nearly as bright as a lumos cast with his wand.

He pulled the envelope out of his bag and slipped the letter out, unfolding the lined paper.

Dear Harry,

I was so happy to hear from you! I was so surprised when I came into my room and saw Hedwig sitting on my bed. It's just lucky my roommate wasn't here – I think it would have given her a shock. She's actually afraid of birds, though I can't imagine why. I've just given her some water and bird seed (Hedwig, not my roommate) but she turned her beak up at the seeds and is sitting there watching me write to you. I think she wants to make sure I write you a decent letter.

I'm back at school now too, so I'm only on the farm for weekends. I miss it, but it's good to see my friends again too. I have the most horrible teacher for form class, but at least I only have to see him for fifteen minutes every day. I won't disgust you with the details, but he has the most revolting habits. Truly, you need to sanitise yourself if you come in contact with him.

I tried out for the girl's rugby team again this year, and I made it. I was too small last year, but this time I made it, just. Our first game is in three weeks time, and I can't wait!

Write back soon and tell me more about your school.

I miss you, love Aislinn

Harry smiled and lay back, wondering when he would get to see her again. He could apparate now, or he could Floo, so it wouldn't be hard for him to get there, especially since her school was in the city.

He could go any Hogsmeade weekend, and on the Christmas holidays.

The thought buoyed him considerably, and the letter had driven Fidelimency and the prophecy completely from his mind. Clearing his mind, Harry relaxed and drifted off into a peaceful sleep.

...

Hey everyone, I hope you all found this chapter interesting. Please review and let me know what you think :)

If anyone is interested in writing the first Quidditch match, or a DA meeting for me, let me know in a review or a message.

I have exams coming up, so I'm going to be flat out for the next month with studying. I'll try to get another chapter out in about two weeks, and then the one after that will come once exams are out of the way (two weeks after that). Once holidays are on, we'll be back to updates at least once a week.

Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter: christoh13, jenstarfire, Forgotten Lake, La Mariane, cyiusblack, purpleflyingmonkeys, pink-fogg, SHuntress, tiny099, Nights Silhouette, nxkris, BadGirlgoesworse, Concealed Convict, ams71080, Slytherin66, Jensindenial3516, writer-of-deathandlife, ashchild666, Makurayami Ookami

and

Dreamweaver: Hey! Well, I hope what happened wasn't a let-down or anything. I think people were expecting something a bit bigger. Thanks for reviewing : )

Gypsy Peanut: Thanks, glad you liked it. Hope you enjoy the rest. : ) Thanks for the review.

Sorry, I was going to post this yesterday and completely forgot about it...

The next morning, there was an article in the Daily Prophet about a massive Death Eater attack in a small wizarding village near London. A dozen people had been killed, and several had disappeared.

Voldemort had been quiet lately, but the attack reminded Harry forcefully of the decision he had to make. He knew what he would choose to do of course; in his opinion, Fidelimency was the only option. He had a meeting with Snape after dinner, and he told him then.

"I want to try Fidelimency. At least with this way, there's a chance I might not have to die."

Snape nodded, and Harry could tell it was the answer he had expected.

"I don't want to tell Dumbledore about it," he added. "At least not yet."

Snape frowned, but after a moment he nodded in assent. "Very well. For now, that decision is yours. I am not sure how soon we should begin. I do not know if it would be better for you to master Legilimency first, or to begin Fidelimency straight away."

Harry frowned. Snape told him what to do, he didn't let Harry make decisions about their lessons, ever, but now he seemed to be asking Harry's opinion. "Maybe we could not do Occlumency anymore. I'm pretty good at that now, and learning Fidelimency is more important. We could do Legilimency at the same time, if you think I still need practice that."

Snape thought about it for a moment. "Have the visions lessened?"

Harry frowned thoughtfully. "I think... yes, they have, but I don't think it's the way we expected."



“What do you mean?”

“Legilimency has taught me to control my mind, but my connection to Voldemort is through our souls. Now that I have better control, the visions tend to be... more specific. I don’t have them if I really convince myself not to, but I want to know what he’s up to, and so it’s sometimes hard to convince myself not to go looking. The thing is, now that I have better control, I nearly always see what I wanted to see, something that answers a question I had, not just some random vision. Does that make sense?”

Snape scowled. “That indeed was not the intended result, though I suppose it makes sense now that we know the link is through the soul.” He nodded then, coming to a decision. “We shall begin Fidelimency in our next lesson, and go over Legilimency occasionally to make sure you aren’t slipping.”

...

On the way back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry went up to the Owlery with a letter for Aislinn. It had been a bit difficult describing some of the things he wanted to talk about, like Quidditch and his classes. Quidditch had been replaced with soccer, potions with chemistry, Defence against the Dark Arts with Health, and Ancient Runes with English, even though it was hardly similar.

Astronomy had remained the same, but the others he had simply left out.

Hedwig fluttered down as soon as entered the room, flapping once around him before settling on a window ledge. Harry stroked her feathers and then tied the letter, and a large bag of Owl Treats to her leg. “Take this to Aislinn for me girl, and don’t eat any of those treats on the way.”

He turned around to go when someone else came into the Owlery. Malfoy was looking extremely tired and dishevelled; his hair a mess and his robes crumpled. His face had a pinched look. It suddenly occurred to Harry that he hadn’t seen the Slytherin in classes all day.

“Malfoy, what’s wrong?”

“None of your business!” he replied hotly, sending Harry a sneer, but the emotion left his face as soon as the words had left his mouth.

Sighing, he called down a handsome eagle owl and tied a letter to its leg. As soon as he’d done so, the owl screeched in Harry’s direction and flew away.

Malfoy turned to go, and Harry caught up with him. “Have a bad night?” he asked sarcastically, remembering the article about the Death Eater attack.

Malfoy clenched his jaw and refused to answer, not even looking in Harry’s direction.

Harry sighed. “Come on, let’s go down to the chamber.”

Malfoy pursed his lips and glanced over at Harry, then gave a one shouldered shrug and indicated for Harry to go ahead.

Down in the chamber, they sat down on the lounge.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked awkwardly.

Malfoy shrugged. “Not really.”

Harry drummed his fingers on the lounge, not really sure of what to say. He felt sorry for Malfoy, but he’d warned him, and the Slytherin had made the decision to follow Voldemort.

Malfoy was sitting staring out the window over the canyon, his hand running lightly over his left forearm.

“Does it hurt?”

Malfoy’s eyes flickered over to Harry. “When he calls.” He nodded. “The rest of the time it’s just... I don’t know how to explain it, but I’m always conscious of it. It makes me feel different.”

Slowly, Malfoy drew back his sleeve and Harry saw skull and snake that Voldemort branded on to the arms of his followers. Malfoy ran his fingers lightly over the rough black skin. "The instant I was marked I felt... worse, sort of more unhappy, and it's been like that ever since."

Harry slid over on the lounge to look closer. He could feel the evil rolling off of it, but there was something else as well, something distinctly disturbing to Harry. The sight of the skull made him feel strangely ecstatic, powerful. He wanted to touch it; he knew it would feel familiar, reassure him.

He stood up quickly, tearing his eyes away from the Mark. He cleared his throat.

"So er... I wanted to ask you; where is that painting of your grandfather in the ministry?"

Malfoy shrugged, squeezing his eyes tightly together. "Um... I think... he was head of the Wizengamot for a time; I think it hangs in the main courtroom. Why?"

Harry shook his head. "Just wondering. Come on, let's go flying."

"I don't really feel like it."

"Neither did I when I was upset, but it really made me feel better."

Harry finally convinced Malfoy to leave the chamber, and they flew around the turrets of the castle for a while before coming to rest along the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Suddenly, Harry heard the soft footsteps of some four-legged creature. He slithered along quietly, seeking out the animal. He came upon it suddenly, both of them surprised.

It was a Scottish Wild Cat, and its hackles were raised. It was hissing, its back arched and its eyes locked firmly on Harry.

Harry reared back on instinct, sensing danger, but then relaxed, laughing at himself. The Wild Cat might be bigger than a normal cat, but it was tiny compared to him. He towered above it.

He leaned way down, eyeing the cat closely. The cat swiped at his nose and hissed again, and Harry instinctually hissed back. The cat yowled and jumped back, and Harry realised that when he had hissed, something had sprayed from his mouth, catching the cat.

The cat turned and bolted away, and Harry gave a loud hiss after it, feeling triumphant. As soon as the cat was out of sight though, he felt slightly ashamed at having terrorised the poor little creature. He had to get used to his animal instincts.

Malfoy moved out of the shadows, and Harry could sense the humour in his voice. "Scared of a cat, Potter?"

Harry hissed at Malfoy. "I wasn't scared, and I didn't mean to hurt it."

Malfoy snorted, and a small burst of flame appeared in the night. "Don't worry, it looked fine to me. It ran off all right."

"Did you see though? I sprayed something at it!"

"Well it isn't surprising. You had to have some defensive technique."

Harry tested it out, trying to spray the substance again. It came easily, two jets of liquid spraying from somewhere in his mouth. The substance splattered on the trees and the ground, and a sizzling sound filled the air for a few seconds. "It's like acid or something," he commented.

As if to prove he was better, Malfoy breathed a huge fireball into the air, and Harry had to admit it was more impressive.

"Arrogant prat," he muttered, though the prat part didn't seem to translate very well.

..

Harry was walking to class with Ron and Hermione the next day when the voices of two teachers reached them

“Dragons, truly? And on the front lawns, you say?”

Harry turned the corner to see McGonagall nodding. “Yes, and one of them spat at me, some sort of burning substance. It left quite a scar on my hand.” McGonagall held out her left hand, and Snape leaned over, inspecting it.

“Perhaps a Spanish Mangler, they are known to be venomous, though this is hardly their natural habitat. Perhaps Hagrid would have a better idea than I about such things. For all we know, they belong to him. Merlin knows he’s done this sort of thing before.”

“Yes, yes, you’re right of course. I might go and see him later. I’ll have to talk to Albus too. Dragons flying so close to the castle could be dangerous, particularly if they appear during daylight hours when children are about.”

Harry grinned and kept walking.

Behind them, he heard a chuckle, and Malfoy overtook them, followed by the usual group of Slytherins.

To Harry’s surprise, Hermione scowled darkly after them.

Harry raised an eyebrow at her.

“I can’t stand him! He’s just so obnoxious. Every time I have to deal with him for some Head Boy and Girl duty, he treats me like I’m beneath him.”

“Git,” muttered Ron, putting an arm around Hermione’s shoulders.

“It’s never bothered you before,” replied Harry. “You usually just ignore him.”

“Yes, but I’ve never had to spend any time with him either. Now that he’s Head Boy and we have to organise things together... I don’t know how you partnered with him in potions all last year. It must have been horrible.”

Harry shrugged and gave a noncommittal grunt. "It wasn't that bad."

Ron shot Harry a dirty look and he shrugged sheepishly. He wondered what Ron would say if he told them that he'd spent a lot more time with Malfoy than just potions class.

.oOo.\_.oOo.

Harry was down in the chamber alone, practicing a wandless shield spell. He'd decided that if he ended up in a duel and lost his wand, it was the sort of spell he would need.

He'd learned Protego in his fourth year and was perfectly capable with a wand, but it was proving considerably more difficult without one.

He hadn't even gotten a flicker of a spell so far, and he'd been practicing for at least an hour each day for nearly a week.

The wand movement for a Protego was a circular motion through the air and then a thrust with the wand. He'd tried it a dozen different ways now, moving his arm fluidly, holding it stiff like a wand, but he was getting nothing.

Flopping down at the table in the chamber library, he pulled his bag towards him and grabbed a scroll of parchment and his quill.

He had an idea now what he wanted to do for his charms project. He didn't know if someone had ever tried it before, but he was fairly certain that if they had tried, then they hadn't succeeded.

Hermione had found him a book on basic arithmancy, as it was used for creating wand movements. From his reading so far, it seemed like sequences of numbers described the path of the wand. It seemed to him that using a rune as a wand movement would be far easier.

He was going to have to do a bit of research on the subject of his charm too, though he didn't know how much information there would be on it.

oOo

“The second Saturday in October is a Hogsmeade weekend, by the way. I’m not supposed to tell anyone until the notices go up, but I’m telling you now Ron, so that you don’t leave all your work for the weekend.” Hermione stared Ron down until he muttered an assurance that he wouldn’t and started scribbling notes on a piece of parchment as if to prove it.

“I wonder if Dumbledore will let me go,” mused Harry. Dumbledore seemed to have realised having aurors follow Harry was a waste of time, because he hadn’t seen anyone at all this year. That didn’t mean for sure that there was no one there of course, but he was pretty sure there wasn’t.

Ron looked up from his work. “You know mate, you’re of age now, so it’s not like they can keep you here, even if they wanted to. You’ve got no guardian; you’re your own boss.”

“Ron!”

“Well it’s true, isn’t it? If Harry wants to go, no one can stop him.”

“Yes, technically I suppose, and you know I want you to come Harry,” she turned to him momentarily, and then back to Ron, “but he has to be careful.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Hermione, I have enough people being over-protective of me without you doing it too.” Besides, he thought, somewhat sarcastically, it isn’t such a bad thing if something bad does happen to me, at least in respect to getting rid of Voldemort.

“I’m going, whether Dumbledore likes it or not. There’s things I want to do.”

oOo

As it happened, Harry was called to Dumbledore’s office the next day.

"I wish to talk to you about the things you learned regarding Voldemort's horcruxes, and the part you have to play in his defeat," he said, when Harry was seated in the circle office.

"Dying, you mean?"

Dumbledore inclined his head. "Although, I do admit it would grieve me to see you dead, and-" Dumbledore held up his hand to stop Harry when he started to speak, "- and I do not intend to let that happen unless all other options are exhausted."

Harry sat back, frowning. "What other options?"

Dumbledore spread his hands. "That I do not know yet, but surely you did not think I would do nothing?"

Harry squirmed uncomfortably.

"I do believe you have the power to defeat him Harry, and I will do everything in my power to help you."

"What power would that be sir?"

"Your greatest strength, Harry, is love. It is something you have that Voldemort never will."

"I don't see how love will help me beat him."

"You must not underestimate your capacity to love. It is what saved you in the Ministry of Magic when Tom tried to possess you. He was driven out by the emotions you felt for your friends. Love, Harry. Love itself repulses Voldemort."

Harry wasn't impressed with this theory, not at all. In fact, it seemed like Dumbledore was grasping at straws and trying to convince someone that he was actually on to something. Harry changed the subject.

"Sir, what happened to my Pendant?"



Dumbledore considered him for a moment before answering. "I have it still."

"When can I have it back?"

Dumbledore did not answer his question. "What can you tell me about it?"

"I don't know anything about it. It's just a pendant."

"I have found no record of it in the school's history; surprising, given that it clearly belonged to our school's most controversial founder. I cannot seem to unravel its magic, nor determine the charms which have been placed upon it."

Unravelling its magic didn't sound too good to Harry, though he was relieved that Dumbledore had not figured out how to use it yet.

"I can, however, tell that it is a powerful object, and given that it was around your neck when you apparated within school grounds, I can guess at least one of its uses."

"Well I can't help you sir. As far as I know, it's just a necklace." It was an obvious lie, but he wasn't going to tell Dumbledore anything about the chamber.

Dumbledore sighed. "Very well, you may go. I'm sure you have much work to do."

"Yes sir." Harry stood to leave, walking over to the door.

"Harry, were you planning on joining your friends in Hogsmeade tomorrow?"

Harry nodded, his hand on the door handle. "Yes sir."

Dumbledore gave a small smile. "Enjoy yourself."

"I will sir."

oOo

Harry found himself alone in the chamber just after curfew one night, and decided it had been a while since he'd dropped in on an Order meeting. He walked along the tunnels to the waterfall painting and then jumped through into his favourite viewing painting.

He was disappointed however, to find Dumbledore sitting alone in his office, working quietly on something at his desk. Harry had a quick look around the circular room for his Pendant, but the office was so full of little silver trinkets that it was too difficult from so high up to pinpoint one in particular.

Sighing, Harry turned to go. Then he had an idea. It had been a while since Harry had been in Phineas' painting, but he stepped through to it now.

It was empty, which was lucky given that he'd forgotten to bring his invisibility cloak. Harry walked to the door in the back of the painting and opened it, stepping through. Then, he took the door that led to Sirius' house. Even though Remus owned it now, Harry still thought of it as Sirius'.

The painting there was empty too, and Harry walked through a couple, encountering no one, either in the paintings or in the house.

He peered out of the canvas. He was pretty sure he was up on the second floor hallway, though he couldn't be sure. It looked pretty much identical to the first floor hallway.

Suddenly two dark figures loomed up on Harry's right and he stepped back, tripping over a log and falling backwards onto the dewy grass.

In front of him, a huge Remus Lupin passed by, talking quietly with a huge Severus Snape.

Harry wondered if they were saying anything that might interest him. Given that Snape hardly seemed to tolerate Remus' presence, Harry guessed that it was probably Order business.

He ran though to the next painting in an attempt to follow them, but the next painting was no longer in the hallway. It was in a medium sized bedroom, and sitting at a small desk in the corner was none other than Dudley Dursley.

Forgetting about Remus and Snape Harry jumped from the painting into the room, and to his satisfaction, he landed with barely a sound. Dudley certainly hadn't heard him. "Hey Duds!"

"Gaah!" Dudley jumped, and Harry was sure that the height he gained defied physics and gravity.

A door was slammed open down the hall, and rapid footsteps approached.

Harry put a finger to his lips and stepped into a dark corner, partly hidden by the long drapes that surrounded the window of the room.

The door was flung open. "Diddy-Dums! Are you alright? I heard you scream!" Aunt Petunia looked around frantically.

"N-nothing's wrong, Mum. I didn't scream."

Aunt Petunia frowned. "Oh, well all right darling." She peered around the dark room suspiciously just to make sure everything was fine, her eyes skipping over Harry. "Mummy's going to bed now. Sleep well sweetie, and call if you need anything."

"I will, thanks Mum."

Aunt Petunia smiled and closed the door, and Harry heard her soft footsteps retreat down the hallway.

As soon as they heard her bedroom door close, Dudley swung around in his chair. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you, Duds. Came to see how you were doing here."

Dudley shrugged. "It's okay, I suppose, for a wizard place. Most of the people seem pretty nice really, except they dress in those things you're wearing."

"Robes, Duds."

"Yeah, anyway, Dad tells me to stay away from them, but it's sort of difficult unless I want to be stuck in here all the time." Dudley waved at the room in general.

"Well I can promise you that everyone here is nice... er well, good, anyway," amended Harry, thinking of Snape. "I didn't think you guys would still be here. You do know that the house is perfectly fine, don't you?"

Dudley nodded. "Mum keeps trying to convince Dad to take us back to Privet Drive, but he just won't. He keeps saying we'll all die if we go back there, and how it's all your fault and we should never have taken you in."

"Yeah well, that's probably true," muttered Harry.

"I'm not too fussed though," said Dudley, visibly brightening. "I like London. I go to school just down the road; it's really posh. Better than Smeltings, too."

"I'm happy for you." Harry walked over to the desk and looked down at what Dudley was working on. It was a letter. To him. "I can just take this with me now, if you'd like," said Harry jokingly.

Dudley scowled. "You promised me you were going to write to me, and I've gotten one letter from you."

Harry sat down on the bed. "I thought you said it wasn't too bad here."

"That's not the point. They're all wizards, and I have no one my own age to talk to except those two who gave me that lolly that time at our house, and even they aren't here all that much."

Harry chuckled at the memory of the ton-tongue-toffee. "I'm a wizard too, Dudley."

Dudley pouted. "That's not the point. Anyway, Dad's thinking about buying a place in London, so we might be out of here soon."

Harry stood up. "Well, I have to be out of here soon. Got to get back to school before anyone realises I'm missing."

Harry turned to go and then stopped. "Shite!"

"What's wrong?" asked Dudley, frowning in concern.

"I can't believe I jumped out of the painting."

"You jumped out of a painting?" asked Dudley, his eyes widening.

"Yeah, and now I can't get back that way." Harry shook his head at his own stupidity.

"I thought you came in through the door..."

Harry walked over to the door.

He was fairly certain that the Floo went to Hogwarts, but that it would only go to the offices of teachers in the Order. Dumbledore was in his office, so that option was out. He had no idea what McGonagall would be doing at this time of night, but marking essays in her office seemed like a pretty good bet. Same for Flitwick and Sprout. The only teacher he knew for sure wasn't in his office at the moment was Snape.

"I need to get downstairs to the kitchen, but it's important that no one sees me. No one can even know I was here."

Dudley nodded. "I can go in front of you and make sure no one's coming if you want."

Harry nodded in return.

Dudley passed Harry and opened the door, looking up and down the corridor, then stepped out and motioned for Harry to follow.

The house was silent as they went down two stories, and they saw and heard no one. They reached the bottom floor and Harry waited in the alcove next to the stairs while Dudley checked the coast was clear.

Dudley looked both ways down the corridor and then turned around and gave Harry a thumbs up.

He was just about to join him when Snape and Remus appeared from the kitchen, stopping Dudley in his tracks.

"Mr. Dursley," murmured Snape in the velvety voice that he used to intimidate students. "It's a little late for you to be wandering the house, is it not... especially a house like this."

"Severus..." tiskd Remus, but neither of them paid him any attention.

Dudley stuttered, and quailed under Snape's glare. He mumbled something. Harry was torn between being annoyed at Snape or amused.

"What was that? Speak up, boy, for Merlin's sake. Even a pixie wouldn't have heard that."

"I j-just wanted a glass of w-water, sir."

Snape stared Dudley down for a few moments before speaking. "On your way then."

Dudley edge nervously around the wizards, and as he darted into the kitchen, Snape turned and whispered, "Be careful," before sweeping off, his robes billowing. Dudley choked at the comment and slammed the door behind him.

Harry ducked back around the corner as the two men passed by. As soon as their footsteps had receded down the hallway, Harry crossed over and opened the kitchen door.

"That guy is creepy!" squeaked Dudley when Harry closed the door behind him.

Harry clapped Dudley on the shoulder as he went to the fireplace. "Don't worry about him. He's like that to everyone."

There was a large pot of floo powder on the mantel, the soft green powder dented where other people's hands had reached in to grab some.

Harry took a small handful and threw it into the dwindling fire. The flames turned emerald green and he stepped in, Dudley watching in awe. "Bye Duds."

"Bye Harry," muttered Dudley sullenly.

"Gryffindor Common Room, Hogwarts," called Harry. Nothing happened. Sirius had once appeared in the common room fire, but perhaps that was different to flooing there.

"Severus Snape's office, Hogwarts." Again, nothing happened. Harry frowned. He knew Snape could floo within Hogwarts, to the infirmary and to the other teacher's offices, but obviously his office was disconnected from outside the school. Sighing, Harry tried again.

"Severus Snape's private chambers, Hogwarts."

A rushing sound filled his ears and he was spinning rapidly, hundreds of fireplaces rushing past him.

He was spat out, and he stumbled to his knees, coughing out the ash he had swallowed.

He stood up and brushed off his robes, and then went to the waterfall painting and left Snape's chambers before the professor came back.

.oOo.\_.oOo.

This didn't turn out as short as I thought it would. I've actually written most of the next chapter, and it's even longer than this one, even though these two were supposed to be short due to exams... oh well. It should be out end of next week.

If there's anything people feel is missing from the story, anything you'd like to see or don't want to see, comments or questions, please review and let me know!

Lastly, I think this story will be finished in around 14 chapters. Not sure on the exact number, but I think that's about right.

Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter: writer-of-deathandlife, nova-carta, nxkris, purpleflyingmonkeys, Nights Silhouette, cyiusblack, pink-fogg, justanotherfan756, La Mariane, Makurayami Ookami, Darthmilton, fhippogriff, Mirriel, Smokin'Oken, ams71080, Kaeim, PhoenixFlight72, D4rkPr1nz, Eagle-Eyes

and

Gypsy Peanut: haha got a good laugh out of your review. Thanks! : )

SOLOMON: I wasn't really sure about the rating, so I made it M just in case. It probably shouldn't be M. I don't know. There's about 14 more chapters, I think. Thanks for the review : )



. o O o . 45 . o O o .

Title

Harry sat in the usual wooden chair in front of Snape's desk. "Will I be doing Fidelimency today?"

"No. Today I will be performing Fidelimency on you."

Harry leaned back and frowned. "Why?"

Snape scowled. "I believe I am the teacher here, Mr. Potter."

Harry bit his tongue and sat silently. He was suddenly feeling quite nervous. He'd been dubious enough about doing Occlumency, but this seemed even more private.

Snape leaned forward and clasped his hands in front of him, looking Harry in the eyes. Suddenly, Harry's perspective changed and he was standing in front of Snape in the landscape of his mind.

"I want you to let down your barriers."

Harry did as Snape said, though he found it difficult at first now that he was so used to having them up constantly. No sooner had he let the last of his defences slip away, then he was back in the office, facing Snape across the desk. He looked around, frowning, and then looked back at Snape. "Did it work? It's weird, it feels like no time has passed."

"No time has passed, Potter!" snapped the Potions Master. Snape pursed his lips in annoyance. "You must continue to look at me. Have you not learned that these magics require eye contact?"

"Oh."

"Oh indeed," sneered Snape. "Again."

This time, Harry let down his barriers before Snape entered his mind.

He shifted, but kept his eyes on Snape's. It felt pretty weird just staring into Snape's eyes, and it was extremely difficult to keep his eyes locked there.

For a few minutes, he could feel Snape's presence in his mind, before it suddenly disappeared completely.

Harry sat and waited.

Harry was sitting in a large, but cosy looking room with dry stone walls and a fluffy carpet. Sunlight was streaming in through the window and an indefinable, pleasant smell hung in the air.

All of a sudden, the mirror in the corner rippled, catching Harry's eye. He looked up at the ornate oval mirror and a tall, dark haired man in flowing black robes stepped through into the room.

As Harry watched, he sneered in distaste at the ambience before his black gaze settled on Harry. "Potter."

Harry smiled and tilted his head. "How do you know my name? Do I know you?"

The man frowned. "It would seem not."

Harry jumped to his feet. "You should call me Harry though."

"The man's face twitched as if he had been going to sneer, but held himself back.

"What's your name?"

"I am Professor Snape."

The man looked around the room, stopping to inspect the mirror. He quietly read the Latin words that ran across the frame of the mirror. "Interesting."

"What's interesting?" asked Harry, coming to stand beside him and look at the mirror.

“The mirror.”

Harry looked up at the man quizzically. Professor Snape was staring avidly at the mirror, a strange expression on his face.

Harry waited patiently, and after a minute he seemed to tear himself away. “Where is this?” asked Professor Snape, gesturing around the room.

Harry smiled. “It’s a room.”

The tall man folded his arms. “Is it really? I hadn’t noticed.”

Harry nodded.

“Is this where you live?”

Harry shrugged.

Snape scowled. “What are you doing here?”

Harry tilted his head and gestured to the floor. “I was doing a jigsaw puzzle.”

Professor Snape’s eyes followed his to the floor and he raised an eyebrow. “I see.”

“Do you want to help?”

“Not at his particular moment, no. Tell me, what is outside?” Snape walked over to the window and looked out. “What...”

Harry jumped over next to him, squishing up against him to see out the window as well. “What’s that?” asked Harry, his eyes wide. Outside the sky and everything around them was a mass of some swirling golden vapour that shimmered and sparkled and moved in a way Harry couldn’t quite explain.

“You don’t know?” asked Snape, looking down at him and edging away from bodily contact. “It is magic...”

“Magic?” Harry’s eyes widened. “Wow! It’s beautiful.”

Professor Snape frowned. “You haven’t looked out the window before?”

Harry cocked his head, thinking. “Yeees.... I think.”

“You don’t seem too sure about that.”

Harry shrugged again and Snape turned away from the window. “There is no door. How do you get out of here?”

Harry looked around, but as soon as Snape had spoken, the room around them disappeared. Around them, the landscape formed itself from the golden mist. They were standing on grass, and the sun was still shining.

They began to walk, but they hadn’t gone far when Harry stopped. “We shouldn’t go that way.”

Snape looked ahead, and then down at Harry. “Why not?”

Harry shivered involuntarily. “It doesn’t feel right.”

“Have you been there before?”

Harry nodded.

“What’s over there?”

As if to answer Snape’s question, the golden mist cleared, but instead of revealing grass or sunlight, a black mass appeared. Snape walked closer and Harry followed slowly.

“It’s always been here,” whispered Harry. “We shouldn’t go over near here.”

He eyed the creeping blackness, the dark tentacles that clung tightly and wormed their way slowly further, growing like a malignant tumour.

“It gets on you if you go too close.” Harry held up a hand, showing the clinging black substance that stuck to his fingers and hand, writhing slightly and slowly, ever-so-slowly growing up his arm.

The man, Professor Snape, reached out a tentative hand towards the mass, which this close, stretched high and wide. Harry gasped and snatched it away with his untainted hand “Don’t touch it! It’ll get on you too, and you can’t get it off!”

Snape disengaged his hand from Harry’s, his face thoughtful and troubled. “I think it is time for me to go.”

Harry raised his eyebrows at Snape. He had closed his eyes and seemed to be concentrating.

“Er... sir?”

He opened his eyes and scowled slightly. “What?”

“What are you doing?”

“Attempting to leave, as I said.”

“Why don’t you go out through the mirror? It’s the way you came in.”

As soon as Harry spoke, the mirror appeared again.

“I suppose that will work,” muttered Snape, and with a final look at Harry, he approached the mirror and reached out a hand for the glass. His hand slipped straight through, and the rest of him quickly followed. The mirror rippled and Professor Snape was gone.

It had been half an hour, and Harry’s eyes hadn’t strayed from Snape’s glazed, unfocussed ones. In the silence of the office though, he was beginning to feel extremely tired. His eyes were dry and wanted to close, and he was cold and starting to shiver.

Suddenly though, Snape's presence reappeared in his mind and a moment later, Snape's eyes refocussed and blinked. He leaned back. "Interesting," he murmured. "Do you... remember?"

Harry frowned. "No. I feel a bit weird, but I don't remember anything. I was just" – Harry shrugged – "here, in the office. So you got to my soul?"

The Potions Master gave a brief nod. "I did."

Harry leaned forward eagerly. "What was it like?"

"Absolutely sickening," muttered Snape, grimacing, but there was something strange in his tone.

"What's wrong?" asked Harry

"There is no doubt that you are a horcrux."

Harry deflated. He supposed he had known it was true since he'd first heard it, but having proof sounded a bit like a death sentence.

"How much- how much of me is... him?"

Snape frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I just keep remembering how the Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin first. Both my parents were Gryffindors, so it makes sense that I should be a Gryffindor too. But there must be a lot of him in there if the Hat thought I was more of a Slytherin."

Snape drummed his fingers on the desk, considering the statement. "The part of his soul – the horcrux – appears to be slowly... growing... I suppose, joining more strongly, more deeply with yours."

Harry swallowed "You mean it's taking over my soul?"

"I'm not too sure. And I may be incorrect when I say it is growing."

Harry picked at a small knot of cotton on the knee of his robes, frowning.

“As for your question, none of him is you. You are you. Merlin knows why that Hat wanted you in my house, but the Hat sees into the mind, Potter, not the soul. If it could see into the soul, it would probably sort a good many people differently. It seems his soul has latched on to yours, and the longer it is there, the more deeply rooted it becomes.”

“So how do we get rid of it?”

Snape sighed and leaned back, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know.”

“Oh... what was actually in my soul?”

“You were, though you did not know me. You appeared younger than you are.”

“Why would that be?”

Snape smirked. “Perhaps it speaks to your emotional maturity.”

Harry almost rolled his eyes, but managed not to. “So when you withdrew, you came back through my mind, the same way you got in?”

Snape inclined his head.

“Does that mean you could get in to his mind?”

“That is an interesting question. Normally Legilimency requires eye contact, but it does not seem to be the case with you and the Dark Lord. Perhaps, given your bond, I also would be able to access his soul via your soul, and from there, his mind. Certainly it seemed it would have been no effort for me to have stepped from your soul to his soul, and if I had done so, and then attempted to leave, I can only surmise that I would have retreated to his mind.”

Harry sat forward eagerly. “So do it!”

"I'm not sure that would be wise."

"Why not? You're heaps better at Legilimency than me; you could actually find out what he's up to!"

"You and I are very different people, Mr. Potter," murmured Snape.

"What do you mean?"

Snape waved a dismissive hand. "He may not notice you are in his mind because you have always been there, in some way. If I were to go into his mind, he may notice, and then he may actively search out the link. That would be... detrimental to our cause."

"You mean... he could get into my mind?"

"It is a possibility. It makes sense that if you can use the link, then so can he, though we should not base any actions on that assumption."

"Don't you think he would have already been using it if he knew he could? What if he is?"

"He doesn't know he can access your mind, I think we can safely know that. Perhaps it can be likened to an ant colony. The part of soul in his body is the largest, the most alive if you will. In an ant colony, the collective are more aware of the queen than she is any of them."

Harry supposed that made sense, in an abstract sort of way.

"I think we will end the lesson here for today. I have much to think about."

"When will I get to try it?"

"Perhaps in our next lesson."

Harry nodded, and then left. He felt odd after the Fidelimency lesson, and he didn't feel like facing the Gryffindor Common Room, full of



loud, chattering students just yet. He wandered through the castle, eventually coming to the Astronomy Tower. He often came here to think. It was quiet, and provided a spectacular view of the castle's grounds.

He climbed up on to the battlements, sitting with his back against one wall of stone and his feet against the other.

He couldn't identify the exact feeling, but he was feeling extremely unsettled in a way he never had before. It was necessarily a bad feeling, just completely strange. He wondered if he should have mentioned it to Snape, and decided he would in their next lesson.

oOo

Everyone was up early the next morning to go to Hogsmeade. Harry wandered down there with Ron and Hermione, and they spent a couple of hours perusing the shops before Ron, in an extremely unsubtle way, told him to shove off and let him and Hermione go and have lunch alone. Harry grinned slyly at Ron and happily left, finding an empty alley way to apparate from.

He apparated as soon as he rounded the corner into it, in case he was being followed, appearing in the Irish wizarding Alley. He quickly pulled off his robe and stuffed it into his bag. Aislinn had pointed out her school one day when they'd come in to the city, and it only took him ten minutes to walk there. As he approached, a chiming bell rang and seconds later the school came to life. Students streamed out of the buildings, all going in different directions.

He paused behind the stone wall at the side of the gate and discreetly pulled his wand out, placing it flat on his hand. "Point me Aislinn," he murmured, and his wand turned to point to his left. It stopped, and then slowly started turning to the right. Wherever she was, she was on the move.

Pocketing it again, he started off towards the building, walking across a large courtyard. He was conspicuously out of uniform, and a few students cast him curious glances. That didn't help when he needed to use the point me spell again.

He found an alcove next to a staircase and faced into the corner, not caring that people were wondering what on earth he was doing. The wand spun to point directly through the wall, and this time it didn't move. He went back outside and headed around the old stone building.

Over to his left was an old stone church, with huge stained glass windows and tall spires.

He turned away from it as he rounded the building and then he saw her, standing next to a bag rack and laughing and talking with a boy. Harry narrowed his eyes, feeling a sudden burst of jealousy.

He approached them and stopped behind Aislinn, subconsciously narrowing his eyes at the boy. "Hi Aislinn."

She turned to wave and then froze for a moment.

"Harry!" she breathed, and her face split in a grin. Aislinn threw her arms around his neck and he pulled her into a hug. "What are you doing here!?" she asked as he kissed the top of her head.

He looked down at her and smiled. "I came to see you."

"I can't believe you're here, in Ireland! How long are you here for?"

"Just for a few hours, and then I have to go."

He evaded a few questions about why he was actually in Ireland, and then pulled her away. "Come on, let's go somewhere."

Aislinn's face fell. "Harry, I can't. I have class."

"Just come somewhere with me for lunch, and then we can come back."

"Oh..." Aislinn deliberated for a moment. "Alright, but let's not get caught leaving the school, or we won't be going anywhere and I'll have detention."

She grabbed his hand and pulled him around the corner, in the opposite direction to the way he had come.

They spotted a teacher and Aislinn jerked on his arm, pulling him a different way, detouring to avoid the teacher.

A stone wall appeared in front of them and he could hear traffic on the other side. They ran across the road and into the lush green parklands across from the school. "That's where we do our school sports." said Aislinn, pointing to a sport oval a hundred metres away. "And there's the river beyond those trees where we do rowing sometimes." She gestured back towards the road. "Over there are the shops where I have a job after school."

"And where do all the students go to snog?" asked Harry, his face serious.

"Harry!" Aislinn's face reddened and she punched him on the shoulder.

He grinned and chuckled.

"Oh, it's freezing," said Aislinn, wrapping her free arm around herself.

Harry pulled his hand out of hers and slipped his arm around her shoulders. Aislinn huddled into his side.

"So where is there to go for lunch?"

"Umm... if we keep going this way we'll come out on a street with lots of little cafe's. We could go there?" She looked up at him and he smiled.

"Sounds good to me."

There was a quaint little cafe on the corner of the street, and they sat at a table near the window.

Aislinn picked up a menu, and Harry realised that he didn't have any muggle money on him. "Erm... I'll be right back," he said, and Aislinn looked up with a smile. "Okay."

He went to the back of the cafe, where a little sign pointed to the men's toilets. He locked himself in a stall and felt around in his pockets. He had a handful of sickles and knuts, a scrap of parchment and a quill. Feeling a bit guilty, he transfigured some of the sickles and knuts into muggle coins and the scrap of parchment into a twenty dollar note. It took him a few goes to get them right.

"So who was that guy you were talking to?" he asked when he sat back at the small table, a tone creeping into his voice against his will.

Aislinn smiled and leaned across the table. "Are you jealous, Harry?"

"No!"

Aislinn sat back and raised an eyebrow. "I can't stop talking to people just because you don't like the look of them."

Harry grumbled and picked up the menu. "Have you decided what you're getting," he asked.

"Mm, just a sandwich, I think. And a milkshake."

They didn't get soft drink at Hogwarts, so Harry got a Mountain Dew with his toasted cheese and tomato sandwich.

While they ate, Aislinn filled him in about what she was doing at school, and he told her a bit about what he'd been doing, though it wasn't much more than he'd said in letters. It was hard to make up lies and half-truths on the spot.

Harry paid, and then put the rest of the money in a collection tin for St. Vinnies. He wasn't sure if the transfigurations would hold, but he felt guilty about having paid with money that wasn't quite real.

They headed back across the road and into the parklands again, and Harry slipped an arm around Aislinn's waist as they walked.

Eventually they wandered into a dark grove of trees, and Aislinn stopped. "Well, we're here."

"We're where?" asked Harry, looking around and expecting to see something, but there was nothing in the silence of the dark patch of trees.

"Where all the students go to snog," she replied with a shy smile. Harry's head whipped around to look at her and he grinned. He stepped close to her and raised a hand to cup her face. With his other hand he drew her closer and leaned down, pressing his lips against hers.

Aislinn wrapped her arms around his neck, one hand on his neck and the other ran lightly through his hair once and then settled there.

There was a chill in the air, but Harry felt increasingly warm the longer they stayed locked together. His hands ran up her back, pulling her tighter against him as their breathing quickened and the kiss deepened.

After a good long while, Aislinn disengaged herself, breathing heavily. "We've been away ages, Harry. I really should go or they'll be out looking for me."

Harry pouted and gave her another kiss before they left the grove of trees. They'd been gone a lot longer than just lunch, and looking at his watch, Harry saw that it was nearly time for school to be over.

"I'm going to be in so much trouble! They'll call my parents and everything," worried Aislinn as they crossed the road.

"Oh, sorry."

Aislinn narrowed her eyes at his expression and punched him lightly on the chest. "You are not!"

Harry shrugged and grinned. "I guess I'm not."

“I don’t want you to go,” she said, squeezing his hand. “I’ve missed you.”

He squeezed back. “Can I come and see you at Christmas?”

Aislinn grinned happily. “Yes! I’ll call my parents tonight and tell them, shall I?”

“Say hello for me when you do.”

They reached the stone wall that bordered this side of the school and he pulled her in for one last kiss before she ran in to the school, disappearing inside one of the buildings.

...

Before he left, Harry apparated out to the farm. Going so quickly from one place to the other, he could really tell how much fresher the air was out here. He stood on a small hill overlooking the farm and gazed fondly over the fields.

He couldn’t wait to come back.

Harry apparated back to Hogsmeade just in time. The last stragglers were being herded along by Professor Sprout, and Harry joined in at the end of the line.

He spotted Seamus and Dean ahead and jogged to catch up with them. “Hey,” he greeted.

“Hey Harry,” said Dean. “What did you get up to today? I didn’t see you around.”

Harry shrugged. “The usual stuff. Honeydukes, Zonko’s, Butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks.”

Seamus grinned. “That does sound like the usual. Sounds to me like you need to get out and try new things.”

They passed the gates of the castle and crossed over the lawns to the Entrance Hall.

Snape, on door duty, cast a disparaging glare at the students traipsing in through the Entrance Hall, and narrowed his eyes when he saw Harry. "Ten points for being out of uniform, Potter."

Harry scowled before remembering that he was out of uniform. Still, it was the weekend, and there were other students out of uniform.

He pointed this out to Snape and received a glare. "The younger students have not been in Hogsmeade representing the school, Potter. Unless you want to lose another ten points, I suggest you move on and stop blocking the doorway."

...

Harry was practicing a wandless shield spell again, in the large empty room off the side of the chamber. He and Malfoy had come down after their Astronomy lesson, and the Slytherin was studying in the other room.

He still hadn't managed to produce even a flicker, and he was becoming extremely frustrated at trying so many different movements with his arms and body in an attempt to get the spell to work.

When he finally managed the spell, it happened very suddenly.

He started with his left hand high and his right hand low, directly below it. Then, his left hand traced downwards along the left side of the circle, and his right hand went up. A silvery mist spread behind his hands, strengthening and filling in when his hands met the beginning of the mist from the other hand, forming a full circle of the mist.

He completed the movement, bringing his right hand down to the middle of the circle and thrusting forward with it. The silvery mist blew forward, bulging out and forming a huge transparent silvery shield.

“Yes!” he hissed quietly, ending the charm. Then he tried it again. It worked. All that time practicing and not getting even a flicker, and suddenly he could do it, just like that.

He stuck his head around the doorway and called into the chamber. “Hey Malfoy, want to duel for a while? It’s been ages since we practiced.”

The Slytherin was seated in an armchair, one leg slung over the arm and a book propped against his knee. He looked up from the book, and then gave an arrogant smirk. “Ready for a thrashing, Potter?”

Malfoy stood and pulled his wand from his pocket, twirling it between his fingers.

“We’ll see about that.” Harry ducked into the chamber and Malfoy entered a few seconds later.

The duel began immediately, Malfoy casting a spell before Harry had even realised they’d started. He dodged it – just – and sent a spell straight back. “Terra concito,” he hissed, the Parseltongue spell rolling off his tongue.

Draco scowled at the spell, knowing it was harder to defend against the Parseltongue spells when he couldn’t understand what Harry was saying.

“Tarantallegra!”

“Glacius ventos!”

“Stupefy!”

“Caecus oculus! Oris Adhera!”

Harry’s second spell struck, and Malfoy was suddenly unable to talk. Since Defence against the Dark Arts the previous year however, the Slytherin had gotten extremely good at wordless magic, and he sent a spell straight back at Harry.



Harry threw up a shield spell, not recognising the spell and not able to hear Malfoy say it. They exchanged a few more spells before Malfoy broke Harry's spell and could talk again.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

"Esacia!"

Harry seemed to be gaining the edge; he was fitter than Malfoy, and wasn't slowing down as much. However, the Slytherin had learned a good many new spells since the last time they had duelled, and Harry was forced to do a lot more dodging than usual. Malfoy caught him with a strong stinging hex at one point, which slowed him down a bit.

As they duelled, the sleeve of Malfoy's robe came up a bit and Harry caught sight of the Dark Mark branded on his arm. Again, he was inexplicably drawn to it, even for the split second that it was uncovered.

As he saw it, he was distracted, and Malfoy took the opportunity to disarm Harry. His wand flew through the air, but Malfoy wasted no time in catching it. Instead, he sent a stunning spell at Harry.

Feeling a thrill of exhilaration, Harry performed the wandless protego, and the shield formed just in time, the red beam of light hitting it.

The spell rebounded straight back at Malfoy, who hadn't moved when he'd cast the spell, convinced that Harry had no means of defence. The Slytherin's eyes widened, and his face was frozen in that expression as he fell to the floor, stunned.

Harry walked over and picked up his wand, then knelt down next to the Slytherin, pointing it at his chest. "Enervate."

He grinned as Malfoy regained consciousness. Malfoy scowled and propped himself up on his hands. "How did you do that?"

"I've been practicing."

Malfoy scowled. "You could have told me you could do wandless magic."

"It's only that one spell."

"Still, wipe that smirk off your face, Potter."

Harry grinned wider and held out a hand to the Slytherin. Malfoy narrowed his eyes, but grabbed it, and Harry pulled him up. They sat down at the edge of the duelling platform, Harry's breathing evening out from the duel.

They sat in silence as they caught their breaths.

After a while, Harry jerked his chin at Malfoy's arm. "What's the incantation for it?"

Malfoy shot him a quick look, knowing exactly what Harry was talking about. "Why do you want to know?"

Harry shrugged. "No reason."

"Morsmorde."

Harry frowned. "That's the incantation for the one that hangs in the sky. Shouldn't it be different?"

"I suppose maybe it depends on whether you hold your wand to the sky or to someone's arm. I can't say for sure; it's not as if I've ever marked someone."

"But you've cast the other one?"

Malfoy scowled slightly. "No. Well, not like you mean. I've done it just to practice."

Harry drew his eyes away from where Malfoy was fiddling with the sleeve of his robe, trying to stop willing the Slytherin to pull it up and reveal the Mark.

“Do you regret being marked?”

Malfoy shrugged, but gave no verbal answer.

“Do you think a lot of Death Eaters regret joining him?”

Malfoy shrugged again, and then elaborated. “It depends really, on how long they’ve been with him. A lot of them, all of them really, that joined in the first war had no idea what kind of person he was. They joined the cause, not the man. So I think a lot of them regret it, even if they still think he has the right ideas. Some of the people who have joined this time around have been... persuaded... others joined because they wanted to. The former don’t regret it because they didn’t have a choice, and the latter don’t regret it because they just don’t regret it.”

“You knew what kind of person he was when you joined, but it looks to me like you regret it.”

Malfoy shot Harry a dirty look. “Then I guess you could count me in the former.”

oOo

The next day Harry, Ron and Hermione went down to visit Hagrid. Fang greeted them enthusiastically, and even Ron wasn’t tall enough to escape the boar-hound’s slobbering tongue on his face.

Hagrid was ecstatic to see them, ushering them into the cabin and forcing rock cakes and pumpkin juice on them.

“I don’t know if ye’ve heard, but there’s bin dragons spotted on th’ grounds.”

Their three heads shot up at Hagrid’s statement.

“Dragons!” repeated Hermione. “But where did they come from?”

“Oh, the mountains are full of them Mione, or so Charlie says.”

Hagrid nodded, his bushy beard wobbling. "I wouldn't say full o' them, but Ron's right Hermione. They come down from the moun'ains now n' then, but there's so few left in th' wild tha' we jus' don' see 'em."

Hermione leaned forward enthusiastically. "What do you think they're doing flying around here though?"

"Well I've bin talkin' with a mate o' mine, an' he reckons they're probably a pair. Might be that they're lookin' fer a new nestin' ground."

Harry choked on his rock cake, and Ron pounded him on the back. The mouthful of rock cake clunked out onto the table with a heavy thud.

"What makes you think they're a pair?" asked Harry, his eyes watering.

"Well, ye don' get two males hangin' round each other, do ye?"

"Too territorial," added Ron wisely.

"S' right. Course, they could be two females, but that's rare too. Most o' the time, unless it's at a colony, if ye' see two dragons t'gether, it's a pair."

Harry grumbled something the others didn't hear and put the piece of rock cake back in his mouth.

Fang put his head up on Harry's knee, looking up at him with sympathetic eyes, or so it seemed to Harry. He patted the boarhound affectionately, and ignored the drool that was slowly saturating his robe from the knee down.

"Where did you see them?" asked Ron.

"Wasn' me," replied Hagrid glumly. "McGonagall was out on the grounds one nigh' n' had a bit o' a run in wth 'em." Hagrid chuckled.

Harry couldn't help but smile at the memory.

“Where are they nesting, do you know?” asked Hermione. “And what kind of dragons are they?”

“Dunno, they ‘aven’t been seen since. Might be they were jus’ passin’ through on their way somewhere else.” Hagrid looked even sadder.

The subject changed to other things until they had to go back to the castle.

“Dragons, can you believe it! I hope we see them,” enthused Ron, scanning the skies as they walked, as if he were expecting the dragons to pop up at any second. “Charlie said they’re on the lookout for a new male for the reserve in Romania.

“It’s got to be hard to catch a dragon,” said Harry, alarmed at the thought of being caught and shipped off in a crate like Norbert had been.

“Oh, yeah, but they know their stuff. Besides, they might only take them if it doesn’t look like they can survive here on their own, or if they threatening the school. Doesn’t make sense to take them out of their natural habitat into a new one.”

Harry felt a little more relieved about that. He didn’t want to be flying around, worrying about getting caught by Ron’s brother and his friends.

Ron pulled a rock cake out of his pocket, receiving an amused look from Harry and a surprised one from Hermione. “What? I’m hungry.” Ron started to gnaw at the rock cake.

Harry snorted and then turned back in the other direction, walking past the blank stretch of wall they had just passed.

There was a DA meeting at 11 o’clock, and they were expecting a fairly large group.

They quickly set up the room and shortly after students started to trickle in, starting with the usual seventh year students.

When everyone was assembled, Harry stood up to speak. "Um – thanks for coming, it's good to see this many people here. Today we're going to be practicing a defensive spell, and I want everyone to split up into their year levels–"

A small boy raised his hand timidly.

"Er... yes?"

"We were wondering if you could teach us how to do a patronus?" squeaked another little first year, and about a fifth of the room nodded in agreement.

Harry groaned and looked around at Ron and Hermione, who were giving him little smiles.

Harry ran his hand through his hair. "How many people want to learn how to do a patronus?"

All the first and second years, and a few from higher year levels raised their hands, nearly a third of the people that were there.

Harry sighed. "All right, all the people who want to learn a patronus need to go over that side of the room, and everyone else on this side here."

As everyone went to the side they wanted, Luna, Ginny and Neville volunteered to help teach patronuses, which helped a lot. "Thanks guys, although I don't think we'll need five people. If one of you go with Ron to help out with Patronuses, me and Hermione can take care of everyone else.

Neville turned to Luna and Ginny. "You two can learn the new spell if you want. I'll help Ron."

Ginny and Luna smiled at Neville. "Okay, thanks Neville."

"Come on Nev, let's get these little firsties sorted out," said Ron, and they left to organise the smaller group.

Harry had already briefly gone through the spell with Ron and Hermione, and Hermione could already produce a weak shield.

They quieted the group and then Harry described the spell that Dolohov had used in the Ministry.

“The incantation is Poshtu Yut.”

The groups repeated it a few times, and then Harry showed them the wand movement. Once they’d practiced that a few times, he lined them all up against the wall to practice it and went over to check on the Patronus students, leaving Hermione to help out the others.

“How’s it going?” asked Harry, coming to stand next to Neville.

“Not too bad. We told them this is very advanced magic, but I think some of them still think they’re going to be able to do it by the end of the lesson.”

Harry grinned. “They’ll lose that notion pretty quickly. Have you showed them yours yet?”

Neville smiled proudly and nodded. “They were really impressed.”

Harry chuckled. “Thanks for helping out Nev. I’ll show you that spell everyone else is learning later. Do you want to help out next week as well?”

Neville looked surprised. “Alright, yeah Harry.”

“Great. Me and Ron and Hermione are going to get together before the next meeting to talk about what we’re doing and learn any spells, so if you want to help out you should join us.”

Neville beamed. “Okay.”

“Great.” Harry clapped him on the shoulder and headed back to see how Hermione was doing.

oOo

Well, I think a fair bit happened in this chapter, so hopefully you all found it interesting. This chapter was supposed to be short, but luckily for all of you I've been procrastinating on my study :)

I wasn't sure how I wanted people's souls to look, and I'm kind of disappointed with how it turned out. I think I would have been disappointed however I wrote it though :P

QuannanHade reminded me that we've passed the one-year mark for this story. I can't believe it, it's gone so fast! Thanks to everyone who has stuck with me since the beginning – it's been a long time! - and to those who've come along more recently ; )

Please review!

Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter:

Queen Victoria, cyiusblack, nxkris, slashslut, zoey zink, ams71080, La Mariane, BadGirlgoesworse, Makurayami Ookami, pink-fogg, tanith-4486, ILoveCockatiels, Night's Silhouette, purpleflyingmonkeys, Slyhterin66, BSolomon.

and

Gypsy Peanut: lol made me laugh again thanks for reviewing : )

QuannanHade: Hey! Actually I was thinking about Snape noticing the soot, but then I wasn't really sure how to incorporate him seeing it into the story. Maybe I'll think of something, maybe not... Lucky you reminded me it had been a year. I was keeping a watch out for it, and then I completely forgot haha. Thanks for the review!



## This Chapter is Really Short

On Monday night Harry made his way down to the dungeons for his lesson with Snape. Surprisingly, he no longer felt the trepidation he used to feel when he'd had to see Snape, and he realised that he had grown to respect Snape. He trusted him too, more than Dumbledore now.

He entered the office, sitting in his seat. "Hello sir."

"Good evening, Mr. Potter."

"Will I be trying Fidelimency on you today?"

Snape gave a short nod. "You will be performing Fidelimency, but not on me."

Harry blinked and then stood up, glaring. "You told Dumbledore!"

Snape stood as well, glaring right back. "Calm yourself Potter, and sit down. Now!"

Harry sat grumpily, feeling a wave of betrayal. "You said you wouldn't tell him."

"And I have not," ground out Snape. "Such a temperamental Gryffindor," he added, disgusted, sitting back down.

"So if I'm not doing it on you, who am I doing it on?"

"Yourself," replied Snape simply.

Harry frowned. "Myself? I thought these things required eye contact. You want me to look in a mirror or something?"

The corner of Snape's lips quirked. "In a way, I suppose. In our last session, you lowered your barriers completely. Given the level you

have progressed to, you should have been able to still sense my presence in your mind?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, but it disappeared while you were in my soul."

Snape nodded once. "Today you will keep some of your barriers up. I am skilled enough to get past them. You will follow me."

"You think that will work?"

"I do. I don't know how to perform Fidelimency on oneself, but you seem to have been doing it when you sleep, so it must be possible."

"What's that got to do with a mirror?"

"You will see," murmured Snape.

This time when Snape spoke the spell, Harry kept up some of his shields, so that a representation of Snape appeared in his mind.

"This way," he said, and Harry followed him as he began to walk. As they did so, the memories circling around them dropped further and further away.

Suddenly, Snape disappeared. He had dropped to a deeper level of Harry's mind and Harry could not seem to follow.

He looked around, but there was nothing in the blackness except for a few memories that he did not recognise.

Snape reappeared a minute later and grabbed Harry around the upper arm.

Harry scowled and Snape's hand slipped straight through his arm.

The Potions Master huffed a sigh. "I am trying to take you with me, Potter, since you seem unable to do it yourself."

Harry allowed Snape to take his arm, and this time the memories continued to drop away. Suddenly, a shift in the atmosphere occurred, and an ornate mirror appeared in front of them. Harry stopped.

“That’s the Mirror of Erised.”

“Indeed it is. Come.”

“But why is it here?”

“It is not the Mirror of Erised. It is a recreation in your mind. I take it you know what the mirror shows you?”

Harry nodded. “What your heart truly desires.”

“Yes. I can only presume that the doorway to your soul is the mirror because you have heard this. Your heart is your soul, and in stepping through the mirror, we are shown who you truly are. Doorways are probably different in the minds of different people. Go through.”

Harry stepped through, appearing in a place shrouded in a golden mist. It felt extremely comfortable and familiar.

He turned around just in time to see Snape stepping out of the mirror. Harry looked around, expecting to see another him, but there was no one. “Where am I? The younger me, I mean.”

“Perhaps because you are here there is no need for a representation of you,” suggested Snape.

There was a strange pull from over towards his left, and Harry followed it. Snape followed silently, seemingly letting Harry go where he pleased.

Suddenly ahead of them the golden mist was marred by a darker, oilier mist. He was repelled and attracted to the blackness at the same time, and he knew that this must be the horcrux.

Harry stopped some distance away, torn between wanting to stay as far away as possible and wanting to jump right in. Snape drew alongside him.

“So this is what happens when I sleep and see what he’s doing? My mind is going through my soul and into his, and then through to his mind?”

Snape nodded.

“So I just need to learn to control that, and then find some way of destroying his soul once I’m in it?”

“I daresay your subconscious mind is somewhat more subtle than your waking one. Until you can learn to be more subtle, I do not think it would be wise to attempt to access his mind while you are awake.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your waking mind would be reacting more strongly to anything you see than your sleeping one.”

“Well how am I supposed to stop that?”

“Occlumency, Legilimency; these will help. Subtlety in this sense is about keeping your emotions within you, not letting them pervade another’s senses in any way. You have made a marked improvement since beginning to learn them, but the Dark Lord is an expert Occlumens and Legilimens. He will sense you in his mind as easily as I can if you go in there with intent.”

“Oh... and how about destroying his soul?”

“Your very soul repels his. When I performed Fidelimency on you last time, your representation would not go near it.”

“If my very soul repels it, then why is it hooking itself in deeper and deeper?”

Snape raise a hand, palm up. "Perhaps because you are a horcrux, it is the spells used that are keeping it here. The Headmaster has relayed the details of what happened when the Dark Lord attempted to possess you in the Ministry."

Harry scowled. "Yeah, he was talking to me about that the other day. He says my greatest power is love."

"You do not believe that?"

Harry stared in surprise. "You do?" He nearly snorted at the idea that Snape believed love could defeat Voldemort.

"I am not the one with the power, Mr. Potter. How can others believe you have power to defeat him if you yourself do not?"

"Yeah, but love... it's stupid. It sounds like some fairytale solution."

"Given that you grew up as a muggle, I shall let that comment pass."

"What do you mean?"

"Hansel and Gretel, Jack and the Beanstalk; do they seem as far-fetched to you as they might if you were muggle?"

"I suppose not, but-"

Snape waved a dismissive hand. "The purpose of this lesson was to show you that you are in fact a horcrux, and to see if we could consciously draw you into your own soul. We have done that, let us leave."

The mirror appeared again, right next to them. Harry took a last look at the black bit of soul, then turned and stepped through the mirror. Snape followed quickly, and moments later they were again facing each other across the table.

"When we begin to destroy the parts of his soul, I imagine we will need to do the one in your body last, lest your consciousness is left floating in whatever object he has made one of his horcruxes."

However, we must also remember what the objective of making a horcrux is. It is my belief that the first piece of soul we will destroy is the one in his own body, as that is where you go when you sleep. When it is destroyed, his consciousness will pass to another horcrux.”

“Are you sure it’s possible to actually destroy his soul? Maybe all we need to do is remove it from the object. That’s what Dumbledore’s been doing, isn’t it?”

“That also is a possibility. In that case, it may not matter the order we destroy them in, so long as the one in your body is done last.”

“But then, it won’t work, will it? Isn’t the point of the horcruxes so that if the soul in his body is set free, it doesn’t... move on, or whatever. So wouldn’t we have to do the one in his body last?”

Snape shook his head. “That is the reason we set free or destroy all parts of his soul. As long as we do it fairly quickly, he will have no time to find a new body. Once all parts of his soul are free of the horcrux, he will no longer be grounded. He will be dead.”

oOo

Harry spent the next day in the chamber, researching banishing charms with Salz curled around his waist, using Harry’s body heat to keep warm. He was beginning to get an idea of the scope of the charms project now, and realised just how big a task it was to create one.

He had the feeling that he’d picked a difficult subject; some of the other students were doing things that seemed much simpler.

He hadn’t told anyone what he was doing, and wasn’t planning on telling anyone until he was sure it would work.

He didn’t know how he was going to find something to practice on though; it wasn’t as if it would be easy to find a Death Eater willing to have his mark removed.

It was his conversation with Malfoy that had convinced him that that was what he wanted to do. He knew all too well what it was like to bear an unwanted mark, and in a way he could sympathise with people who bore the Dark mark, especially if they had taken it unwillingly.

He had no doubt that there would be people willing to have their marks removed, if they found it was possible.

And anything that weakened Voldemort was worth doing.

...

He was sitting in the common room with Ron and Hermione, jotting down notes and ideas for the charm when Ron spoke.

"Dementor attack in a small village outside London," he said, reading from the Daily Prophet.

Harry stopped what he was doing to listen while Ron read the article out loud. Articles about Death Eater activity were a common occurrence, with Voldemort targeting both wizarding and muggle victims.

There was a thoughtful silence for a few minutes until Hermione spoke. "Speaking of dementors, we really need to get hold of a boggart for the DA, so the students can practice against a dementor."

"Ugh," said Ron.

"What?"

"Well Snape's the Defence guy now, isn't he? If anyone knows where the boggarts are, it's probably him."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "We'll delegate the task of asking to someone else then, shall we?"

Harry wondered if his boggart would still turn in to a dementor at all though. He could defend against dementors now, and there wasn't

much point being afraid of something you could beat. Although, Lupin had said that what Harry was afraid of was fear itself, so maybe it would still be a dementor. At any rate, he wouldn't mind if it had changed. He shut his eyes, the words he heard whenever the dementors drew near flashing through his mind.

"Not Harry, please not Harry!"

"Step aside, you silly girl!"

A flash of green.

It hit Harry then; something that hadn't occurred to him before. Voldemort hadn't been going to kill her. Only when she would not get out of the way did he cast the Killing Curse on his mother.

He had been going to spare her, and Harry could only assume that it was because he was granting Snape's request.

He frowned. Why would Voldemort not kill her, just because one of his death eaters asked? She was a muggle, and at that time, Snape hadn't been a particularly high-standing death eater, or so Harry had thought.

Hermione noticed his frown. "Harry?..... Harry?"

He was jerked from his reverie. "Hm?"

"Is something wrong?"

"Oh... no, just thinking." He jumped up and gathered all his stuff together. "I'm off to bed. I'll see you guys in the morning."

...

Thoughts about his charms project must have been floating around his head when he went to bed because that night it was the subject of his dreams.



He was standing over a kneeling man, and around them was a circle of his followers.

He took hold of the young man's arm and placed the tip of his cold finger against the skin. The man shivered at the contact and he smiled cruelly before murmuring the incantation. "Morsmorde." He put all his hate and rage into the spell, all his contempt for the weak and the impure.

The man was silent for only a split second before the first stifled scream of pain burst from him. He smirked at the moans of pain and watched as the skin of the man's forearm twisted and blackened, the form of a skull and snake gradually materialising on the roughened surface. Within half a minute the spell was complete and he dropped the man's arm in disdain.

With a sob, the newly marked Death Eater returned to his place in the circle, his breath coming in gasps.

oOo

A pretty short one, but I'll be updating fairly soon too. It's my birthday tomorrow... and my birthday wish is for a review from everyone reading. Please? It'd be good to know how many people are actually reading the story.

Thanks to all last chapter's reviewers: zoeyzink, nxkris, SHuntress, pink-fogg, BadGirlgoesworse, D4rkPr1nz, PhoenixFlight72, ams71080, purpleflyingmonkeys, Makurayami Ookami, Kaeim, oceanlover14, Slytherin66, christoh13

and

SOLOMON: Yep, she really is. Thanks for reviewing : )

christoh13: Hey! Good to know it's still holding people's interest ; ). I'm not really a fan of the movies, I think they're a bit of a letdown after the books. The next one looks like the best one yet though, so I reckon I'll probably go see it at the movies instead of waiting for it to come out on video. I hope the movie isn't overshadowed by the

release of my next chapter... hah. Thanks heaps for the great review : )

Harry woke up on Saturday morning feeling exceptionally happy, though he couldn't say why. He jumped out of bed early and decided to spend a while polishing his broom. He grabbed his servicing kit that Ron had gotten him one birthday and took his broom down to the common room.

Surprisingly, Ron woke not much later and joined him next to the fire. They waited in the common room for Hermione, discussing tactics for their first Quidditch match. It wasn't until January, but Slytherin had taken the cup year, and they were determined to win it back.

Hermione arrived and as soon as Harry had taken his broom back to his room they headed down to the Great Hall for breakfast, him and Ron still talking about Quidditch.

As they walked to the Gryffindor table, Harry felt eyes upon him. Looking, he saw that nearly every person in the hall had stopped what they were doing and was staring at him. Whispers broke out between people. He frowned as he noticed several professors stand and descend from the head table.

Stopping at the end of the table near some little first years, Harry picked up a mug of pumpkin juice and asked, "What's going on?"

No one answered him; they simply stared at him with wide eyes. Scowling in annoyance, he looked between the group and his eyes fell on a copy of the Daily Prophet held by one of them.

His eyes narrowing in suspicion, he snatched it from the boy, who gave a timid squeak. Dreading what he was about to read, he lowered his eyes to the front page article and gasped. He didn't bother reading the article; the headline was enough. 'Prophecy reveals fate of Boy Who Lived.'

Harry threw down his mug, hearing it shatter on the hard stone floor. The only sound in the Great Hall was the slamming of the door as he strode angrily from the room.

He heard Ron and Hermione hurrying after him, but he sped up, breaking into a run. He had no desire for comfort and commiseration at the moment.

At least now he knew why he'd been feeling so happy this morning.

He ran through the halls, subconsciously heading towards the Chamber of Secrets.

"Mr. Potter!"

Harry stopped at the sound of McGonagall's voice, to see her emerging from her office.

"Professor," he replied, slightly short of breath.

"I am on my way to the headmaster's office. Perhaps you would like to join me?"

"Nn-yes. Yeah, alright," he said, changing his mind mid-sentence. There were a few things he wanted to ask Dumbledore.

McGonagall nodded and swept down the corridor, halting after a few steps for Harry to catch her. "Do you know how they found out?" he asked.

Professor McGonagall shook her head, her lips pressed thin. "That is what I am headed up there to discuss. I imagine there will be a few others there as well."

They walked in silence, both thinking until they came to the Gargoyle statue.

"Sour quill," said McGonagall, and then motioned for Harry to step onto the moving staircase when the Gargoyle slid aside.

They entered the office to find Dumbledore looking grave behind his desk. Snape was reclined in one of the chairs in front of the desk, with Professor Sprout and Flitwick in chairs on either side of him.

Dumbledore flicked his wand when Harry and Professor McGonagall appeared, causing two more chairs to appear. Harry waited until McGonagall settled in the one next to Sprout before sitting in the other.

Harry felt immensely annoyed about seeing more than Snape and McGonagall in the meeting. No one but those two were supposed to know according to the last time he'd spoken with Dumbledore about the issue.

"Well, it seems the Prophecy has finally been made known to the general public," stated Dumbledore, and Harry scowled at the fact that he was stating the blatantly obvious.

"How did they get this? There's supposed to be only one record of the prophecy, and that's you," he spat at Dumbledore.

"Mind your tone with the Headmaster, Potter," murmured Snape, picking at his sleeve.

Harry spared him a brief, annoyed glance before turning back to Dumbledore. "Last time we talked about this, only those two knew," he said, gesturing angrily at Snape and McGonagall. "Now there're two more people in this room who obviously knew before that article, so how many other people did you tell?"

"And which of them has betrayed us?" added McGonagall, surprising Harry by supporting his argument.

"Very few others than those in this room know, and each of those I told I trust implicitly," replied Dumbledore, not really answering Harry's question at all. "I will of course be contacting the others shortly to confirm they are well, and to discuss this with them."

"Is it possible that someone is a... spy?" asked Sprout hesitantly.

Dumbledore shook his head slowly. "I could not begin to imagine any of you betraying the Order." Dumbledore's eyes turned to Harry. "I must ask, Harry, if you told anyone of the prophecy?"

Harry bristled at the implication, but answered the question. "I told Ron and Hermione."

Snape sneered. "Well, there you go, we have located the leak."

Harry rounded on him. "Neither of them would have told anyone," he spat, his voice heated.

"I assure you Potter, there is a far greater chance that someone gained the truth of the prophecy from one of them than from an Order member."

"No, there isn't," he retorted, his anger rising.

"Professor Snape is not saying they told someone willingly, Harry," said Professor McGonagall quietly, giving Snape a cautioning glare. "Most members of the Order all have some measure of protection against the mind arts. We are all trained to recognise if and when someone uses Legilimency on us, though none of us are nearly as good at it as Professor Snape, or even you now, from what I hear. However, Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger are hardly experts. To my knowledge, neither of them have been learning such magic?"

Harry sat back silently, shaking his head to confirm McGonagall's statement that Ron and Hermione had learned Occlumency. He felt a sense of dread at the thought that someone had seen the prophecy in Ron or Hermione's mind, or even in his before he got good at Occlumency.

A discussion began among the professors, tossing about names of people Harry had never heard of before, and theories about who or how the prophecy had been divulged, and he quickly lost track of the conversation. After a while, he grew tired of the increasingly heated discussion and he stood, feeling defeated. "What does it even matter if he knows about the rest of the prophecy or not anyway?" he asked, loudly. The teachers stopped to look at him. "He's already been trying to kill me since he came back. The damage is done - was done - years ago."

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose, looking defeated, and McGonagall's face grew sad. Harry turned to leave.

As he closed the door behind him, he heard Dumbledore speak. "What's done is done. You could not have kn-."

Dumbledore's voice faded as the door closed, and Harry paused, but then kept going, Dumbledore's comment beginning to niggle at him. Had one of them said something to someone? It seemed impossible that one of his teachers had mentioned such important information to someone.

He reached the bottom of the spiral staircase and was going to step into the painting opposite Dumbledore's office and got o the chamber, but then decided to go to the common room instead. It would be too quiet in the chamber, and it would give him too much of an opportunity to think about what had happened.

...

Harry had been glad to escape the Common Room that evening to go to Astronomy. He'd regretted his decision to go there as soon as he opened the portrait hole and everyone in the room turned to look at him with either sympathetic or disbelieving stares, the conversations in the room dying out as they caught sight of him and then flaring louder than before.

It had been mostly empty by the time it was time to go to Astronomy, but the remaining students still cast him curious glances as he left.

He got there fifteen minutes early, relishing in the absolute quiet. It was a cold night, but the sky was crystal clear and sharp.

It aggravated him when the other students arrived talking loudly, though when they set up on the other side of the tower, he could hardly hear them.

Malfoy arrived twenty minutes late, and Harry briefly noted the superior smirk on his face before he turned back to the telescope.

A light thwack sounded and Harry looked over to where Malfoy had thrown down a copy of the Prophet on top of his star chart. He felt some of his anger rush back. "I've already seen it, Malfoy."

"No you haven't. Actually, I wanted to point out another article that you missed reading when you stormed out of the Hall. Unfortunately all of this prophecy business stole some of our collective thunder, or both of us would have been front page news."

The scowl left Harry's face and he looked up, curious. "What do you mean?"

Malfoy simply gestured to the paper and leaned against the battlements, not even bothering to set up his telescope.

The light on the tower was too dark to read, so Harry performed a *lumos*, shielding the light from the rest of the class with his body. The newspaper was opened to the second page, folded in half so that he couldn't see the headline.

He unfolded it and shook it straight, his eyes widening at the title. He looked up at Malfoy.

Malfoy raised his eyes and gave a nod at it, a smirk on his face.

Harry looked back at the article.

## DRAGONS SPOTTED ON HOGWARTS GROUNDS

Rumours have been spreading in recent weeks of two large dragons at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Several people claim to have seen them, but this reporter scoured the grounds and skies and has yet to acquire photographic evidence of the gargantuan reptiles. And these two are indeed gargantuan; one expert claims that their size indicates two males, whilst another expert argues that it is a pair.



Malfoy cut in at this point, though Harry had no idea how he knew he'd just read that. "And just to clarify Potter, you're the girl. You are the smaller one."

Harry rolled his eyes and kept reading, wondering if this expert who was mirroring Hagrid's words was in fact Hagrid.

He claims that male dragons are far too territorial to have such a close association unless they were brothers. Further, he says that they aren't brothers, given that, based on colouring, they are clearly two different species of dragon.

The news has attracted the interest of dragon enthusiasts and conservationists from around England.

"You know what? I'll bet after reading this that people will be looking out for them. We should give them a show."

"No! We can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I was talking to Hagrid with Ron and Hermione about this the other day, and Ron said they're looking for new males in their colony in Romania. What if they come here and try to catch us?"

Malfoy scoffed and gave Harry a look like he was an idiot. "I know I'm not stupid enough to get caught."

"I suppose it isn't like they're going to sneak up on us while we're sleeping, is it?"

"No, and imagine how excited the first years would be – they'll wet their little pants!"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Draco Malfoy wants to give the first years a treat?"

Malfoy tossed his hair. "I'm simply saying, I would have loved to have seen a dragon when I was in younger. I admit I've lost that desire

now that I am one, but I think some of the older students would like to as well.”

“You just want to show off. You like people talking about you, and being in the news.”

Malfoy spread his hands, and gave a shrug. “The burden of being a Malfoy.”

Harry snorted and turned back to his work. “You know, if you don’t get started you’re going to be here all night.”

Malfoy pushed off the wall. “You’re right.” He unrolled his star chart on the table next to Harry’s, pulled out a quill, and then, as Harry watched, began copying Harry’s half-finished star chart.

“Hey! That’s not exactly what I meant.”

“Like you said, if I don’t get started soon I’ll be up here all night.”

“Shouldn’t have been late then, should you?” grumbled Harry tearing his eyes away from the telescope and marking down a star, which Malfoy promptly copied.

“I was busy.”

“Oh yeah, doing what, your hair?” Harry was feeling marginally better from the light conversation.

“No.” Malfoy smirked. “Some of us have women to woo.”

Harry looked up. Malfoy was staring dreamily at the stars, twirling his quill between his fingers. Harry raised an eyebrow, a smile curling his lips. “What’s her name.”

Malfoy looked down at Harry and sniffed. “None of your business.”

“If it’s none of my business, why bring it up? You clearly want to talk about it, or her. Or just boast.”

Malfoy smirked. "True." He marked down another star.

"Slytherin?"

"Of course."

"Seventh year?"

"Mmm... no."

"Hm, well I don't know any Slytherins not in seventh year."

"I guess you'll have to remain unknowing then."

"Any reason why you won't just tell me?" asked Harry, searching for the last star he as supposed to find.

"Where would be the fun in that?"

Harry grinned and turned back to his telescope, amazed that it was Draco Malfoy of all people who had made him feel better.

The class ended shortly after and the students quickly dispersed. It was mid-November, and winter had well and truly arrived. Harry was feeling quite tired, and keen to get back to the warm common room, but a quick fly over the snowy grounds was too enticing to resist.

He looked around. The rest of the class had gone, and he was alone.

Leaning his telescope against the battlements, he climbed up into the space between the battlements.

Standing up, he looked down. It was a long way to the bottom of the tower, plenty of time for him to transform.

There wasn't any room for him to have a run up, so he took the biggest jump outwards that he could.

He tumbled a bit in the air as he fell, so that his back was facing the grounds. The ground was rapidly approaching and the stone wall of the castle was moving past impossible fast.

He transformed just in time, spreading his wings wide and soaring out and around the castle to the canyon. His belly skimmed the grass until he flapped his wings and gained a bit of lift. He did a quick lap around the lake, noting the frozen edges, and then soared to the edge of the forest where he transformed and headed across the lawns and to the Entrance Hall doors. There was a bite in the air, and the sting of it was refreshing on his skin.

He opened the doors to the Entrance Hall a few minutes later and snuck inside, walking as quietly as he could in case Filch was around.

Trudging up to Gryffindor Tower, he realised his bag was still up on the Astronomy Tower. He changed his direction and headed there instead, cursing Dumbledore when he came to stairs for not giving the Pendant back.

The Astronomy Tower had been empty when he'd left, but he was surprised to find several teachers and one of the Hufflepuff astronomy students congregating there. The Hufflepuff girl was crying and pointing towards the battlements.

As he approached, McGonagall saw him. She looked frantic.

"Harry! Oh, thank heavens!" She turned to the other teachers. "He's fine, he's fine."

Harry frowned, looking in confusion between the gathered people. "What's wrong?"

The frantic look left McGonagall's face and was replaced by an angry, thin lipped expression. "Miss. Bennet says you jumped off of the Tower. Is that true?"

Harry felt his stomach plummet. Had she seen him transform? He'd been sure there had been no one else on the Tower at the time. "Er..."

“Good heavens! What were you thinking?” yelled his head of house, coming to her own conclusion. “I have never – never – in all my time as a teacher seen a student do something so completely irresponsible and utterly dangerous!”

Over to the side, Professor Sprout was comforting the sobbing student.

‘You gave Miss Bennet the fright of her life, and not only her. You can only imagine what we thought when she came running to us, telling us-’ McGonagall broke off abruptly, a choke in her voice.

Harry felt his face burning, realising what they must have thought. “It was just a quick fly around the turrets on my broom,” he muttered, still wondering whether or not the Hufflepuff had seen him transform.

“Be that as it may... apologise to Miss Bennet please.”

Harry turned to her, his face still red. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.” He meant it too, although he said it too quickly for it to really sound sincere.

Sprout nodded tersely before ushering the shaking Hufflepuff girl off of the tower.

He turned back to McGonagall, who had pulled herself together and was looking at him sternly. “Now I realise you may have had a bad day, but really... you are banned from Quidditch for the next three weeks. Hopefully that will teach you that your broom should be ridden only on the Quidditch Pitch. You will also serve a detention with me on Tuesday, and receive 20 points from Gryffindor.”

Harry scowled at the severe punishment, but bit his tongue. He’d just have to be more careful next time.

oOo

The news that he had jumped off the Astronomy Tower spread pretty quickly, with mixed reactions. Most of the boys thought it was pretty

cool, and he hoped none of them would try it. Some of the girls seemed to think it was brave, and others, like Hermione and McGonagall, seemed to think it had been completely stupid.

Hermione treated him to a bit of a lecture while they sat studying in the common room the next evening, but he cut her off quickly by saying he had to take a book back to the library. He did in fact need to. "I have to take a book back to the library," said Harry, jumping up and grabbing the overdue book. "I'll be back."

Hermione nodded absently as Harry left. "Her lecture seemed to have been some sort of automatic spiel about acting responsible, because she seemed immersed in her own work, like she hadn't even been listening to what she herself had been saying.

Harry shook his head in amusement as he trekked to the library. The halls were quiet and he met no one on the way. He stood the book on the returns counter and left the library.

He was startled by a voice as he exited the library. "You're an idiot, Potter."

Harry looked up to see Malfoy leaning against the wall.

Harry rolled his eyes and walked around the Slytherin. "I'm not an idiot, Malfoy. I didn't think anyone was watching."

Malfoy grabbed his arm and spun him around. "But they were, weren't they? What if someone saw you transform?"

"So people find out I'm an animagus and I'll have to register. I understand that. An-"

"No, I don't think you do!" hissed Malfoy, his voice quiet. "You know who the new Minister is; do you really think he won't use something like this as an excuse to get you out of the castle?"

Harry stopped and looked at Malfoy closely. "Have you heard something?"

Malfoy's voice dropped even lower, so that Harry could hardly hear it.

"No. Just watch yourself. If something like that did happen, it could affect me, too."

"If I did have to register, I'm not going to go about telling everyone that you are too."

"But they'll consider that the other dragon is an animagus too, won't they. And if so, they'll want to find out who it is."

"I still wouldn't tell them, and there's nothing they could do to make me. You don't need to worry."

"Nothing they could do? Thorne might put on a nice face for the public, but believe me; he knows how to play dirty."

Harry supposed he could see Malfoy's point, but then something occurred to him. "Wait a minute – weren't you the one, just last night, who was telling me that we should let people see us because you thought it would be exciting for them?"

Malfoy stepped back with a scowl. "That's different. We won't be transforming in front of people. I still think that's a good idea." Malfoy tossed his head and then glanced at his watch. "I have to go."

He stalked off, and Harry shook his head at the Slytherin's behaviour before continuing on his way.

oOo

The next day Harry received a letter from Aislinn. He was all set to go back to the farm for a week of the Christmas holidays, and he couldn't wait for the last week to finish. He was a bit sad to be missing Christmas at Hogwarts, given that it was his last year, but he'd be here for some of it.

The Great Hall had already been decked out, and Filch was in the process of merry-ing up the castle's main corridors.

Harry found it quite amusing that Filch was assigned the job. Each time Harry saw the caretaker carrying bundles of holly or red bows and chains of beads through the halls, the man had a fouler than usual look on his face, and Harry had the strong impression that Filch disapproved of Christmas.

After reading the letter, Harry tucked it away in his bag and went back to his charms project. He was in the process of making lists of possible wand movements and incantations for it, using words like banish and gone and such. There were plenty of possible incantations, but the movements were a bit harder. He'd been sticking with runes, as he wasn't particularly good at Arithmancy, and he had only gone over the basics.

Still, his list was coming together nicely and he was going to start testing some out in the next week or so.

oOo

It was Saturday afternoon, and Harry was standing out on the courtyard with Malfoy, shivering in the frigid air that was blowing in from the canyon.

"I shouldn't have let you talk me into this," he grumbled, though he was curious to see what people's reactions would be. Running and screaming, probably.

Malfoy gave him a satisfied smile and then took a running leap off the courtyard and into the deep chasm, transforming quickly and flying outwards. Harry followed him quickly, catching up with the Slytherin as he flew over the castle's turrets.

His acute hearing picked out gasps and a few shrieks as they flew over the lawns, their shadows crossing over the students who had braved the outdoors. He saw Hagrid stacking firewood near his cabin, and inwardly grinned when the half-giant's face lit up.



Harry did a huge loop, and saw people standing up and staring at them. He did a few theatrical twists in the air, and Malfoy attempted to outdo him, as usual.

After a few minutes, quite a crowd had gathered outside, despite the cold, everyone's faces turned up to the sky watching as the two of them put on a display.

At one point, Malfoy sent a small group of first years scattering when he flew too low over them. Some teachers came out with their wands drawn, but it was evident that Harry and Malfoy weren't out to eat anyone, so eventually they just stood around watching with the students.

They flew around the lawns and over the Black Lake for a good forty minutes before the light started to fade and people headed back into the castle and out of the cold.

Harry was starting to feel pretty cold; being a cold blooded animal he couldn't warm himself. The two of them headed back around the castle towards the canyon, and then Harry turned in towards the castle and lined up with the courtyard.

He landed quite smoothly, managing to keep his feet, even if he did nearly run into the wall of the castle. He heard the rush of wings and moved out of the way quickly as Malfoy landed right behind him.

Malfoy flopped down on the stone bench under the oak tree and Harry joined him.

The Slytherin looked over and grinned. "That was fun."

Harry shrugged, feeling pain in his shoulders and back.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Oh, admit it Potter. You liked all their 'oohs' and 'ahs' as much as I did."

Harry relented and gave a grin. He rolled his shoulders and neck, trying to relieve the ache. Flying made him use muscles he wouldn't normally, maybe even muscles he didn't normally have.

Malfoy saw the movement and rolled his own shoulders, grimacing. "Kills, doesn't it," he groaned, massaging one shoulder with the opposite hand.

Harry nodded. He hadn't noticed such a bad ache before, but he hadn't flown around for that long or done such theatrical flying before either.

They didn't sit for long, because it started to snow. Harry walked over to the wall of the castle and ran a finger down the indent in the door, causing it to click open. He stepped inside and moved over to the fire, sinking gratefully into an armchair. He flicked his wand at the huge curtain that covered the window so that it fell across it, in order to keep the heat in better.

Malfoy headed back through the tunnels to the Slytherin Common Room not much later, but Harry stayed in the Chamber a bit longer talking quietly with Salazar.

oOo

The Great Hall at breakfast and in his classes the next day were all full of people talking about seeing the dragons. Ron was particularly keen about them, and Harry had the feeling that he was going in the same career direction as Charlie.

Harry had told Ron and Hermione he hadn't seen them, and Ron had felt it was his duty to give Harry a sloop by sloop account of what he'd seen the day before. Ron kept up the descriptions every time he thought the professor wasn't looking, and promised to fill Harry in on the rest at lunch when Harry had to go to Potions and Ron to Care of Magical Creatures.

Potions was spent making a particularly difficult nutrient draught that was used in the infirmary when people couldn't eat. Going by the smell of it, Harry didn't know how anyone could keep the potion down if they couldn't keep normal food down, but it was supposed to be a very effective potion.

Nearing the end of class, Harry was leaning over the desk, scrubbing it, when he felt something drop into his pocket. Straightening up, he slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out a small tub of some pale, opaque balm.

He looked around, and saw Malfoy swinging his bag over his shoulder across the room. He caught Harry looking and raised a hand to his shoulder, giving it a quick squeeze.

Harry nodded discretely and pocketed the balm. He hadn't even thought to go to Madam Pomfrey for anything to relieve the ache in his back and shoulders. Although, he suspected Malfoy had actually made it, as it didn't look like the balm they sometimes picked up after a hard Quidditch practice.

He finished cleaning up and headed back to the Tower with Hermione.

oOo

Record number of reviews for last chapter yay! I wish it was my birthday more often ; )

Do people think Harry should destroy Voldemort's bits of soul, or just set them free?

Took me a bit longer to update than I thought, even though I'm on holidays. Been having fun doing other stuff ;) I'll try to update sooner next time.

Thanks to LadyNightVamp, oceanlover14, mountainwizard, tanith-4486, x Alica and Rosalie 4 Eva x, riddle\_.uk, fhippogriff, deathy A. Saiyana, pink-fogg, Matt101, zoey zink, ams71080, SHuntress, nxkris, Elyma, IMAN2688, D4rkPr1nz, Basilisk's Fang, Makurayami Ookami, BadGirlgoesworse, HipMoonGuru, Jensindenial3516, purpleflyingmonkeys, JonathLee, Alexiad, RainPure, mimiren4045, Slytherin66, nova-carta

and

spatz: Thanks so much for the review! Great to hear you like it : )

cam: Hey! Thanks for the comments, good to hear. : ) Hope you enjoyed this chappie too!

Gypsy Peanut: lol I have no idea what parable you're talking about, but still haha. Thanks for reviewing : )

K: Thanks for letting me know, much appreciated!

QuannanHade: Hey : ) I know I said I'd update soon, and I fully intended to, but then I just got busy doing other stuff... Glad you liked the last two though. What instrument do you play? Thanks for reviewing : )

Rachel feld: Glad you're enjoying it, and thanks so much for reviewing : )

## Charms, Chants, and More Cheese, Please

Harry had been a bit dubious about Malfoy's plan to reveal themselves so openly to people, but he was now exceedingly grateful that he had gone along with the plan. Everyone was so excited about having seen them that they had pretty much forgotten the article about the prophecy. Now, the stares and sympathetic glances he'd been receiving had abated overnight.

It gave him a secret thrill of satisfaction to hear people so excited about their little display, and he knew Malfoy was the same, because he had seen the Slytherin smirking happily whenever anyone mentioned the event within his hearing range.

Everyone else might have forgotten about it, at least for now, but he certainly hadn't. As far as he knew, the Professors hadn't determined for sure how it had been leaked. It worried him that someone might have gained the truth of the prophecy from Ron or Hermione, but the only other option was that there was a spy in the Order, and he supposed that really, that was far worse. He knew Ron and Hermione wouldn't have told anyone on purpose, but it was possible someone had performed Legilimency on them.

It wasn't the only question niggling at him either; he was still confused about his realisation that Voldemort had been going to spare his mother, and he could think of no other reason for him doing so than because Snape had asked. And that made no sense to Harry at all.

He had a lesson with Snape later, and he was contemplating asking the Potions Master about it then.

...

He fretted about asking Snape all day, but in the end he decided that if he didn't get an answer, it was going to distract him and keep him up at night thinking about it.

He sat down in his usual chair and spoke before Snape could. "Sir, there was something I wanted to ask you before we started."

Snape leaned back and steepled the tips of his fingers together. He raised an eyebrow for Harry to continue.

"I... wh... For the DA, some of the students are learning how to do a patronus, and we – Ron, Hermione and I, were wondering if you knew where we could find a boggart for them to practice on."

Snape drummed his fingers on the desk, staring impassively at Harry for a moment. "I shall find one for you. Now, we shall begi—"

"Er, there was something else I wanted to ask you," interrupted Harry before Snape got on a roll.

"Yes?" asked Snape impatiently.

Harry paused, feeling a bit unsure, but then steeled his resolve and continued. "When I'm near a dementor... I hear my parents. I hear my parents on the day they died." He knew Snape knew this already, but he wasn't sure how else to begin. "After he killed my Dad, he came up the stairs to the room my Mum had taken me to."

Snape's face had paled somewhat, and Harry glanced away, staring at the desk instead. "I remember he kept telling her to step aside, but she wouldn't. She kept begging him not kill me, to take her instead. She wouldn't move, so he killed her too."

Snape swallowed audibly, and Harry raised his eyes to Snape's again. "Why was he going to let her live?"

Snape didn't answer.

"Was it because you asked him not to kill her? Is that who he was talking about that night me and Malfoy rescued you?"

Snape finally moved, clearing his throat. "That night?"

Harry nodded, wondering how much of it Snape actually remembered. "He said he remembered how you begged him to spare the life of a... mudblood... was it my mother he was talking about?"

After several moments, Snape gave the smallest of nods.

"I just – I didn't know why else he would have been going to spare her." He frowned. "But even then, why would he do it just because someone asked him?"

He looked expectantly at Snape, but he was disappointed. "I can't answer your questions, Potter... I," Snape shook his head. "I do not know the answer."

"But-

"Potter, leave it. I can say nothing that will satisfy your curiosity."

Snape seemed keen to change the subject, and Harry supposed he could appreciate that it was a touchy subject for him. He sighed, realising Snape wouldn't or had nothing more to say about it.

"Fine," he muttered. "Thanks."

Snape blanched. "There is no need to thank me," he said stiffly. "We shall begin now. He stared him in the eye, and Harry's vision shifted until they were standing in the darkness of Harry's shields. He dropped them enough for Snape to easily lead him into the depths of his mind, and then further, into his soul. For the second time, they stepped through the Mirror of Erised into Harry's soul.

They made their way quickly to the black bit of soul that was latched on to Harry's, and it seemed to him that it didn't take as long as last time. He supposed that the soul probably didn't really have a shape as such, that Voldemort's horcrux wasn't attached at some bottom left corner, so like in the mind, when they imagined something and it appeared, when you wanted to find a part of the soul, it would appear to you.

Snape stopped several metres away and looked at Harry. "When the Dark Lord possessed you in the Ministry, thoughts of your friends drove him from your body, correct?"

Harry nodded.

"What I want to try today is much the same. We have two options; one is for you to go into his soul and," Snape gave a small shrug, "Think about your friends."

Harry tried hard not to raise his eyebrows at that suggestion.

"The second option is for you to cast charms at it. There are spells which convey emotion, such as cheering charms."

Harry snorted, earning a scowl from Snape. He schooled his face into what he hoped was a more suitable expression, but his tone was still clearly disbelieving. "You want me to defeat Voldemort with Cheering Charms?"

Snape pursed his lips. "Do not be imbecilic. There are far more powerful and subtle charms than Cheering Charms. However, we will leave that option for another time. I believe we will begin with the method which has previously shown some success."

"What if it works and I get rid of this horcrux though? I won't have a connection with him anymore and we won't be able to destroy the other pieces."

"I do not think it will be particularly easy to disentangle his soul from yours. And I believe you will have some sort of sense of the level of attachment."

"But I can't feel it now," said Harry, dubious about Snape's statement.

"Can't you?" asked Snape softly, his gaze shifting and his eyes becoming unfocussed. "I can, just standing here. I daresay once the level of entanglement changes, you will have some sense of it. Sixteen years is a long time to grow used to the presence of another."



Sometimes you can only appreciate how deeply they have influenced and affected you when they are gone.”

Harry frowned at Snape’s faraway demeanour, but didn’t question it. Instead, he nodded, accepting Snape’s explanation and hoping he was right that they wouldn’t destroy the connection before they could make use of it.

Snape rubbed absent-mindedly at his left forearm. “Does it affect you, being this close to his soul,” asked Harry, hoping he wouldn’t be rebuked.

Snape gave a short nod, but didn’t elaborate.

Harry looked at the black bit of soul, feeling suddenly nervous. “You’re coming in with me, aren’t you?” he asked, turning hopefully to Snape, but the Potions Master shook his head.

“We have already discussed that. We do not want the Dark Lord to recognise and unfamiliar presence that may alert him to the level of your connection with him.”

Harry took a deep breath, remembering the conversation and agreeing that they could not risk that.

He stepped close to the piece of soul, his chest nearly touching it. Then, after one last look at Snape, who gave what might have been an encouraging nod, Harry took a step forward.

There was nothing, absolutely nothing around him. It was beyond doubt the darkest place he had ever been. He felt blind, felt like the darkness was pressing against his eyeballs. There was utter silence, and it was cold. He took all of this in in the split second before his head split in half. He gasped as pain radiate from his scar. A ragged yell sprang from his throat before he gained some control of himself and closed his mouth, gritting his teeth. He sank to his knees, his hands going to his head in a futile attempt to relieve the pain.

The pain was so bad he felt like vomiting, and then as if her were going to pass out, and then back to feeling like vomiting again.

He was strongly tempted to run back out; in fact, it was just about the only thought running through his mind. A small part of his mind told him if he did that though, then he would be letting Voldemort win. He couldn't run away; he had to at least try to fight.

He struggled to get straight in his mind what he was supposed to be doing, but it was nearly impossible to think through the pain-induced haze.

He managed to drag his mind to thoughts of his friends. At first it was hard, but the longer he tried the easier it became to see them laughing and smiling. He thought of Aislinn too, generating feelings that were different and more intense than his feelings of friendship with Ron and Hermione.

He sensed an odd shift around him, but his eyes were squeezed shut so tight from the pain, and he couldn't open them to look.

He had no idea if he was doing the right thing, and he hoped to hell he wasn't putting himself through such pain for nothing, but surely, if it was hurting him this much, it must be having the same effect on the horcrux?

He tore his thoughts away from that track and back to his friends, tears leaking out from his tightly shut eyes and running down his face.

After what seemed like an age, the pain became too unbearable and he knew that if he didn't leave he was going to pass out, and he didn't think this was a very good place to do so.

He half crawled- half walked back the direction he thought he had come, and luckily he went in the right direction.

Snape was pacing back and forth when Harry stumbled from the darkness back into his own soul. He promptly collapsed to his knees again and finally expelled the contents of his stomach. He felt hands on his shoulders, and Snape pulled him up to his feet. Harry sagged against him, too worn out to care that he was drooling his regurgitated dinner on Snape's robes.

It dimly registered as the mirror appeared in front of them, and seconds later he was sitting at Snape's desk again. He fell forward, banging his head hard on the desk. He hardly felt it, compared with the pain from his scar.

The pain receded a fair bit now that he was out of Voldemort's soul, and it was like waking up from a mild dream.

He lifted his head up just as Snape spoke. "Here, drink this," he said, handing Harry a vial of pain relief potion. Harry gratefully drank it down, handing the empty vial back to Snape, who vanished it with a flick of his hand.

"How long was I in there?" groaned Harry, running a hand through his hair.

Nearly twenty minutes," muttered Snape, frowning as he assessed Harry's condition. "How do you feel?"

"My head hurts."

Harry could almost hear Snape roll his eyes. "Other than the obvious headache?"

Harry considered the question, and realised he did feel something else, though he couldn't really explain it.

"I forgot to mention it to you, but after you were in my soul last time, I felt weird. I feel weird again, but this time it's a bad kind of weird. I don't really know how to explain it."

Snape looked thoughtful.

"It wasn't bad the first time, just different. I guess it's expected though, isn't it, that going into someone's soul would feel weird, or having someone tramping around in your soul?"

"Yes, it should be expected."

“Yeah, and everyone knows that a soul like his has got to feel bad.”

“Those who believe that people like him possess a soul,” replied Snape. “Perhaps when another visits your soul, or you visit the soul of another, some kind of impression is left.” He paused for a moment, studying Harry. “What was it like in his soul?”

“I don’t know; I had my eyes closed the entire time, pretty much.”

“Hmph. Very well.”

Before I closed them though, it was dark, really, really dark, and cold too.”

“Hm.” Snape stood and went to the book case behind his desk, returning with a new looking book. “This book has a relatively detailed explanation of emotive charms which you should consider reading should this method fail.”

Harry gave a weak smile as he reached to take it. “You know if you keep giving me books to read, I’m going to end up with half your bookshelf in my trunk.”

“Yes, I am still waiting for you to return the last two I loaned you. I expect them back in no less a condition than they were when I gave them to you.”

Harry desperately tried to remember which book was lying under his bed and which one was stashed in his trunk under dead quills and inkpots. “Er... yes sir.”

Snape scowled, and then motioned to the new book. “Despite the ridiculous title, it is an informative book.”

Harry looked at the title. “Charms, Chants, and More Cheese, Please?” If he’d been in a better mood, he probably would have laughed. “Who the hell makes up titles like that?”

“Elmerick Neckstaff makes up titles like that,” replied Snape dryly.

Harry slipped it into his bag. "I'll get right to reading that sir," he said as he stood.

Snape rolled his eyes and waved his hand at the door. "Get out of my office."

oOo

"Can you teach me a Parseltongue spell?" asked Malfoy, leaning forward eagerly.

Harry frowned from his spot on the lounge. "That might be a bit difficult, don't you think?"

"No. I don't want to learn the language, but you can still say it and I can copy you until I get it right."

Harry cocked his head. "I suppose it might work."

"Of course it will. Besides, you owe me for helping you with Occlumency and Legilimency."

He had a point, and Harry couldn't see the harm in teaching him one Parseltongue spell. "Alright then, I'll teach you."

Malfoy actually looked surprised that Harry had agreed so quickly, but he quickly hid the expression. "Teach me that one that freaked Zabini out when we were duelling in defence last year."

Harry cast his mind back, trying to recall which spell that had been. There were several that it could have been, so he just picked one of them at random.

"I'm going to teach you tacta inferu."

Malfoy's eyes glittered. "I didn't understand you, but it sounds dangerous. What does it do?"

Harry cocked his head, thinking. "I don't actually know. I haven't ever been on the receiving end." He grinned. "You'll have to ask Zabini."

Although, I'm not sure if this was the one that I actually used on him or not."

"That doesn't matter. Say it again," ordered Malfoy.

Harry complied, and wondered how it sounded to the ears of people who did not speak Parseltongue. He'd never actually heard a snake hiss, so he couldn't really imagine the exact sound.

Malfoy tried it, and Harry burst out laughing, causing a scowl to form on Malfoy's face. "What?"

Harry shook his head in amusement. "I don't know what that was, but it wasn't English and it certainly wasn't Parseltongue."

A red tinge coloured Malfoy's cheeks. "That was my first try, Potter. I didn't laugh at your pathetic attempts at Legilimency when we started."

Harry sobered up, realising he'd greatly offended Malfoy. "Alright, alright. Sorry, okay? Let's try it again." He paused before saying the spell again, and he spent the rest of the evening trying to explain to Malfoy how to say the words properly.

It was nearly twelve when he made his way back to the common room and went to bed.

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He was standing in a dark room with wood-panelled walls. There was a single, high-backed chair in the middle of the room, and a hearth rug sat in front of a dim fire.

Gazing away from the kneeling figure, he seated himself in the chair, staring into the fire. "What news have you brought me, Severus?"

"My Lord, I bring you news of a prophecy."

"A prophecy..." He sneered. "I hardly believe in such nonsense as-"

“My Lord, it speaks of your defeat.”

He froze, unsure he had heard correctly. He stood, and moved to stand over his follower, ignoring the man’s interruption. “Look at me Severus.”

Black eyes rose hesitantly to meet his. He took the man’s chin in his hand.

Harry dove into the familiar mind, seeking out the memory. He drew it out effortlessly, and in seconds he was standing in a thin corridor, doors lining each side. He heard the soft footsteps of Snape behind him as he walked towards a door that had been left open a crack. Light was shining in a thin beam across the hall and up the opposite wall, and a man’s deep voice resonated quietly from within.

He strolled into the room, leaving his servant peering in through the gap in the door. A sneer crossed his face at the sight of the old fool Dumbledore, but his disparaging gaze settled on the ageing, eccentric looking woman he was talking to.

She was prattling on about how one of her ancestors was a famous seer, when all of a sudden her voice grew harsh. She sat rigidly, her eyes staring ahead, focussed on something that no one else could see. If it was an act, it was good.

When she began to tell the prophecy he froze, as if even the sound of his breathing would somehow block out her words and cause him to miss something.

Halfway through however, darkness began to creep around the edges of the memory, and the woman’s voice grew faint. He looked around and realised that his servant had been caught eaves dropping by the inn keeper, and had not caught the rest of the prophecy. He gritted his teeth and returned to the hall where his servant was arguing with the man. He was angry that this huge secret had been ripped from him.

He would not learn the entirety of the prophecy tonight, but he would hear it, somehow. He withdrew from his servant’s mind. “You have

done well, Severus," he murmured, moving to stare into the fire. "Tell no one else what you have learned tonight."

"Of course, my Lord."

He grew silent, and his servant recognised the dismissal, walking backwards, head bowed, until he reached the door.

The door closed quietly, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

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Harry's eyes snapped open. A black anger rose in him, and if he had taken the time, he might have realised it was not entirely his. He threw the covers off of his bed and dressed, ripping several buttons off his pyjama top in his haste.

He stormed down to the common room, then stopped, wondering where he was going. He ran back up the stairs and stopped on the landing, consumed with an irrational anger and a profound sense of betrayal.

The entrance to the tunnels which led to the chamber was under his feet, so he hissed at it to open and descended into the cool tunnel.

Torches lit and then whipped out as he passed, his rapid steps echoing in the enclosed space.

He got to the chamber, but then he was at a loss for what to do. He was fired up, and the silence of the early morning was too quiet.

He'd carted in a heavy rock for Salz to sun himself on, and it was sitting in the middle of the low table, beside the tree branch.

He had forgotten his wand, but he didn't need it; holding his arm out at the rock, he flung it towards the bay window with a roar.

The huge glass window shattered. It was brittle from the cold, and it cracked easily, shards of glass raining down into the canyon and to the courtyard outside. A few bits fell on the inside, making no sound



on the carpet except for a light tinkle where they hit other pieces of glass.

He was too angry to repara it, but now the cold wind was blowing in, stinging his flushed skin.

He moved over to the fireplace and sunk miserably into one of the arm chairs. He felt tears pricking the back of his eyes, but he closed them and forced them away. Minutes later, he realised he couldn't sit still, and he sprang up, heading for the passages.

Harry walked aimlessly, not really sure which way he was going, and wandered through the dim stone passageway in a dark mood, unable to fully accept what he had learned.

He felt immensely betrayed; he was beyond words to describe it. He was angry at Dumbledore for not telling him, but he was angrier at Snape, completely at a loss for what to do. Snape was the reason Harry had no family, the reason he walked around with a jagged scar on his forehead, the reason for everything bad in Harry's life.

Were the lessons and the times he had saved Harry's life some way of trying to atone for his past mistakes, some way to make up for having killed his parents and nearly him, or was it just because Snape had been friends with his mother?

He didn't know what to believe anymore; he'd really learned to trust and depend on Snape, more so than he'd realised until the illusion had come crashing down. Somehow, without him realising it, Snape had come to be some kind of mentor to him; he'd cared about Snape. And Snape had been lying to him all along.

He eventually wound his way back to the chamber, after having walked for nearly two hours. Some of his anger had drained, but he felt hopeless now. He sat in a stew until the sun started to show and his stomach gave a rumble. With nothing better to do, he left the chamber and went to the Great Hall. It wasn't quite seven yet, and it was empty except for him. The ceiling was starting to lighten slightly with the rising sun, but it was a cloudy day and it was slowly moving from a deep black to nothing more than a dull grey.

The school slowly began to come to life, with students settling in around him at the table, though he barely acknowledged their presence.

Ron and Hermione gave him concerned looks when he barely replied to their hellos. "Something wrong mate? You didn't wait for us to come down this morning."

Harry shrugged in response to Ron's question and served himself up some breakfast, hastily shoving a piece of toast into his mouth in the hope that they wouldn't ask him any more questions.

Hermione seemed to get the hint that he didn't want to talk, because she elbowed Ron when he started to ask Harry something else.

A bang sounded from the front of the hall, and Harry saw that Snape had entered through the door behind the Head Table, his robes billowing around him.

Harry's hands clenched so tightly around his cutlery that his knuckles turned white and his nails dug into his palms.

Ron saw where he was looking and muttered the obligatory 'git.' It was too kind a word in Harry's opinion.

Snape took his seat next to Dumbledore and Harry's scowl deepened. Dumbledore surely knew that Snape had sold his parents out to Voldemort, and yet all these years he had been telling Harry he could be trusted.

All too soon, the bell rang for classes and Harry realised he hadn't actually eaten anything; he'd spent the whole time glaring darkly at Snape, who hadn't once looked in Harry's direction

He had potions first up, and he dragged after Hermione. The closer he came to the potions classroom, the darker his mood became. The thought of facing Snape made him feel sick.

They reached the door of the classroom and Harry paused. "You go, Hermione. I'll be in shortly."

She gave him a curious look. "Alright. Don't be too long though; you know how Snape hates it when people are late."

"Except when they're the late James Potter," mumbled Harry, though Hermione didn't hear him.

He debated whether or not he should go to the hospital wing and claim he had a head ache, because he didn't want to have to look at Snape's face for an hour. He didn't know if he could do that without exploding.

It turned out he didn't need to make the decision; he'd assumed Snape was in the classroom already, but a moment later a door banged open and Snape appeared, carrying a stack of parchments that looked like their last assignment.

"Potter," he said as he approached. "What are you loitering in the corridor for? Hurry up and get inside."

Harry blinked stupidly at the comment, and didn't bother answering. At seeing Snape, the anger in him grew further.

Snape must have noticed his expression because he stopped and frowned, peering closely at Harry. "What is wrong?" he inquired, sounding slightly irritated at having to ask.

"What's the matter?" repeated Harry, and then he let out a harsh bark of laughter. "I'll tell you what's the bloody matter!" He stepped closer, dropping his bag "You sold my parents out to Voldemort!" he hissed. To Harry's own surprise, he actually shoved Snape in the chest as he spoke, making him stumble back a step. Harry's voice rose to a yell as he continued. "You're the reason they're dead, you're the reason I've got a dirty great scar on my forehead and why I grew up in a cupboard and why Sirius went to Azkaban and why Voldemort's been trying to kill me! That's what's the matter!"

There was a pregnant pause. The silence was ringing in Harry's ears and he realised how loudly he must have been yelling.

Snape's face had gone deathly pale and when he spoke his voice was strained. "I don't know wher-"

Harry gave a strangled yell and without thinking, his fist collided with Snape's jaw, the Potions Master's head snapping around. Harry was a lot shorter, but Snape had made no move to defend himself and the force of Harry's punch caused him to spin into the classroom door with a thud.

Harry didn't stay to see whether Snape kept his feet or not; he grabbed his bag and stormed off down the corridor.

He spent the rest of the morning in the common room, expecting at any moment that someone would come to collect him, but the room remained ominously silent. There were few students in there, and those that were there were working quietly.

He spent lunch in the kitchens rather than going to the Great Hall, and then returned to the common room again. It was much noisier now, so he took his pile of homework down to the chamber, unable to tolerate the happy chatter. He also didn't want to hang around waiting for the hammer to drop. There was no way he would get away with punching Snape.

In the end though, he didn't really get much work done, spending most of his time staring out the window he had broken that morning and thinking that he really should fix it.

Suddenly a huge pale orange dragon flew past the window. Seconds later the door opened and Malfoy entered, raising an eyebrow at the shattered window. He repaired it with a flick of his wand.

He tisked and wagged a finger at Harry, smirking. "Letting your emotions get the better of you."

Harry shot him a foul look.

“Feel like letting some of that anger out in a duel?”

“Maybe if you were Snape,” muttered Harry.

Malfoy smirked. “So what did he do? I take it it was something more serious than docking points. Are you finally seeing what a traitorous bastard he is; out for himself and no one else?”

It irked Harry that his answer at the moment was yes. He stood up and walked over to the lounges, but Malfoy followed.

“I know he’s teaching you Occlumency, maybe even Legilimency. Did you see something you didn’t like?”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Mind your own business.”

Malfoy’s smirk broadened. “I’ll take that as a yes. Come on, duelling will take your mind off it.”

It took Malfoy a good fifteen minutes of whining and cajoling and convincing, but eventually they were facing off across the duelling platform.

Concentrating on the duel did make him forget about Snape, at least after he stopped imagining that Malfoy was Snape, and the adrenalin brought him out of the depressed state he’d been in.

They had duelled so much together that it was getting more and more difficult for anyone to win. Harry could often recognise what spell Malfoy was going to use by his stance.

They’d both won a few times when Harry started to tire. He dodged the Slytherin’s Leg-locker Curse and sent off a spell which caused pebbles to rain down on Malfoy, then blocked a curse he hadn’t seen before with a Protego, then sent off the Parseltongue curse that he was teaching Malfoy.

When they’d started, they had both been casting a lot of their spells wordlessly, but they were both losing concentration and starting to call them out.

“Petrificus Totalus!” shouted Malfoy.

“Glacius ventos!”

“Galarus!”

Terra concito!” The ground beneath Malfoy’s feet shook, and it was pure luck that his next spell, a stinging hex, caught Harry full in the chest.

“Adficio lingua!”

“Tarantallegra!”

“Sectumsemptra!”

“Cadecius!”

Harry dodged the curse Malfoy had thrown at him and raised his wand to send another one, but then stopped. Malfoy had stopped, dropping his wand and bringing a hand up to his body. A deep crimson stain was spreading over his robes from three slash marks that ran across his chest and stomach.

“Draco!” Harry lunged forward as Malfoy dropped to his knees, clutching at his bloody chest, where three deep gouges had ripped deep into his flesh.

“Why did you do that to me?” Malfoy grasped around for his wand, finally finding it, and pointing it at himself. He began reciting several charms that Harry vaguely recognised as healing charms, but they did not seem to have any effect.

He pulled Draco up. “Come on, we need to get to the hospital wing.”

Malfoy nodded, seemingly disoriented. He grimaced in pain as Harry dragged him out the door.

He had never wished more for the Pendant as he and Draco stumbled along, through the library and up the stairs, past the basilisk and into the drain tunnel. Draco was leaning on him more and more heavily, and by the time they reached the stairs that led up to Myrtle's bathroom, Harry was practically dragging him. He hadn't realised it was that bad, but judging by the way his robes were saturated, he was bleeding heavily.

Harry spared a glance at the Slytherin's face, and noticed his eyes fluttering nearly shut, his face deathly pale.

He cast a floating charm on Draco, directing him up the stairs. At the top, he hissed out the password.

In his haste, he slipped on the wet floor of the bathroom, crashing painfully to his knees and losing the spell on Malfoy, who thudded to the ground as well.

Harry scrambled over to him, patting his cheek. "Draco! Draco, don't fall asleep!" The Slytherin blinked hard and nodded, but almost immediately his eyes began to drift slowly shut.

Harry's yells had alerted the resident ghost to their presence, because with a spray of water, she came surging out of a stall, stopping dead when she saw the bloody sight.

"Murder!" screamed Myrtle, her shrill voice ringing loudly. "Murder in the bathroom!"

Harry ignored her and was pointing his wand to cast another floating charm when seconds later the door burst open and Snape appeared.

His eyes widened and he barely spared Harry a glance as he knelt beside Draco, ripping open the Slytherin's shirt and bringing his wand to Draco's chest.

Whatever healing spell Snape was muttering was far more effective than the one Draco had tried, because the skin began to knit itself back together, the flow of blood easing as the wounds closed.

Snape stood and gave Harry a deadly serious look. "You'll wait for me here, Potter," he breathed, before turning on his heel and levitating Malfoy out of the bathroom.

The door swung shut and complete silence enveloped his ears.

It didn't occur to Harry to argue about waiting, and he went over to a sink, turning on a tap only to realise it was the one that didn't work. He moved over to the next one and rinsed the blood off of his hands.

It seemed to take an age for Snape to return, closing the door loudly behind him when he did so. Harry did his best not to recoil from Snape's intense glare as the Potions Master stared down his nose at him.

"Well," began Snape in a dangerous voice. "Who would have thought the noble Harry Potter knew such Dark Magic."

Harry felt the morning's anger rushing back to him. "You'd know all about Dark Magic, wouldn't you?" he spat.

Snape's face tightened, but other than that, he ignored the comment. "Your potions text. Bring it to me here. Now."

Harry blinked, and the surprise must have been evident on his face, for Snape said, "That's right, Potter. You know the one."

How did Snape know? Harry nodded and left the bathroom, wondering. He walked quickly, beginning to shiver as his wet robes grew cold. He ignored the questions thrown his way as he went through the common room and grabbed his seventh year potions text and headed back to the bathroom, knowing full well that it wasn't the book Snape wanted.

The Potions Master was sneering at the wet bathroom when Harry entered and held out the book.

Snape took one look at the front of the book, flipped it open to the inside cover, glanced at that, then fanned through the other pages, all



in about four seconds. He snapped the book shut and shoved it back at Harry. "You're sixth year text – where is it?"

Harry feigned a puzzled look. "I don't have it anymore. I don't need it."

"You are lying to me."

Harry opened his mouth to argue, but Snape cut him off. "Where did you learn that spell?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. I've never even cast it before, it wasn't intentional."

"But you were duelling?"

Harry nodded.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor."

Harry opened his mouth to argue, but Snape silenced him with a look.

"Is Draco going to be okay?"

A strange look crossed Snape's face and he crossed his arms. "Draco? Draco will be fine. Lucky enough to avoid even scarring, I would imagine."

He stared intently at Harry, and Harry made sure his shields were up, though it did not feel like Snape was attempting to perform Legilimency on him.

There was a brief silence as Snape stared Harry down, and Harry stared back, not willing to back down.

"You and I need to have a chat, I think," said Snape finally.

Harry knew Snape was no longer talking about Malfoy and the curse Harry had just used on him. Harry squared his shoulders and looked Snape in the eye. "I have nothing to say to you, and you have nothing to say that I want to listen to."

“Do not be so disrespectful,” hissed Snape, leaning down towards Harry.

“You don’t deserve my respect!” he spat back, and then tried to leave. Snape grabbed him by the arm as he went past, but Harry merely returned his ugly look, wrenched himself from Snape’s grasp and stormed out.

...

Harry crept down to the infirmary under his invisibility cloak after curfew that night. He was feeling thoroughly drained, both physically and emotionally, and wanted nothing more than to fall in to bed, but he wanted to apologise to Malfoy first.

He walked into the hospital wing and thankfully found it empty except for the bed nearest the window.

He could see Malfoy sorting through something on the bed, and he approached quietly, making the Slytherin jump when he pulled off his cloak.

“Oh!” Malfoy put a hand over his heart. “You startled me.” He chuckled. Then he went back to sorting what turned out to be Bertie Bott’s every flavour beans into groups depending on their colour.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Er... right, well I just came to see how you were feeling. Snape said you’d be okay, but I thought I should apologise.”

Malfoy nodded. “You really got me good, but I’m okay now. Just a bit sore.”

“Ask Madam Pomfrey for some more pain relief potion.”

“All taken care of.” Malfoy slipped a small flask off the side table and took a sip of the purple liquid. He smacked his lips. “Tastes like blueberries.”

“How much of that have you had?”

Malfoy shrugged and hammered the cork back in.

“Well I’m going to go. Get some rest and go easy on that potion, eh?”

Draco’s eyes bulged. “Are you silly? It’s only nine thirty in the evening, Potter, and besides I’ve been sleeping pretty all afternoon. I’m not tired yet.”

Malfoy reached over to his bedside table, which was covered in an assortment of Honeydukes products, and got a pack of cards.

“Exploding Snap?” asked Harry, raising an eyebrow. “A bit loud don’t you think?”

Malfoy looked crestfallen, but when he spoke his voice held a slightly sarcastic tone. “Yeah, you’re right... oh, but wait! I just remembered I’m a wizard, and I can do a silencing charm! Who would have thought we could solve our problem with magic?” He banged himself on the side of the head.

“Are you okay?” Harry was beginning to think that Malfoy had had a bit more pain relief than Madam Pomfrey had prescribed.

“Never better.” Malfoy patted the bed next to him and Harry sat awkwardly down near his feet.

“Don’t be silly, you can’t play like that.” Malfoy crossed his legs and then leaned forward and patted the bed again. Harry moved and sat opposite the Slytherin, who started dealing out the cards.

Malfoy seemed to have forgotten all about the silencing charm, so Harry cast it himself.

Malfoy dealt the last card. “I’ll start.” He put a card down on the bed, and started humming quietly.

Harry shook his head in amusement and put a card on top. Much to Malfoy’s disappointment they went through the whole pack without a

snap, and Malfoy whined until Harry agreed to play another game, and then another because Harry won the second one.

...

He'd been planning on going back to the Tower when he left the hospital wing, but somehow he found himself in the Transfiguration corridor, staring at the large wall-high painting that could take him into the paintings.

He stepped through, and on a whim he made his way to Dumbledore's office. He had expected it to be empty, but instead found Snape and Dumbledore in a discussion.

"Doubtful anyone taught it to him," mused Dumbledore, taking a sip of some red liquid from a deep goblet.

Snape hummed in agreement. "I assume he read it in my old potions text. I have searched the classroom for it and cannot find it, so most likely he has it."

Harry was momentarily shocked. Snape was the Half-Blood-Prince? He was sure that was what they were talking about.

He was then overcome by frustration and annoyance. Since he'd found the book, it had become a sort of friend and guide to him, helping him in potions. He'd spent hours perusing the interesting notes in the margins. Now, learning it was Snape's, he felt doubly betrayed.

He'd have to get rid of it now; he wasn't keeping something that belonged to the man who had practically killed his parents.

"Where he read it is not really the issue anyway, and if indeed he read it in my book, then he has read the worst of it. I'm quite aware that many students will at some time be curious and seek to inform themselves about the Dark Arts, Albus. The vast majority of them read a few books and leave it at that. What I am concerned about is the fact that Potter has learned a spell, and has used it on a classmate."

"Perhaps he did not know what the spell would do?" suggested Dumbledore.

"That is true," admitted Snape grudgingly, "but if that is the case then he is more of a dunderhead than I thought for using it."

"Co-"

"One does not casually toss about spells one does not know the effect of, especially in a duel."

Dumbledore sighed. "I am sure he will be more careful in the future."

Snape gave a disparaging snort as if he thought Dumbledore was a lunatic for the suggestion.

"I believe you may be over reacting to the situation, Severus."

"I am not over reacting," snarled Snape, his lip curling.

Dumbledore ignored the protest. "You are concerned about your godson, I understand that. It must have been quite a shock to see him in that state. Perhaps too, you are feeling defensive about the truth Harry has learned. It would be callous if you were not worried about the effect it will have on your relationship with him."

Snape had an ugly look on his face. "I am hardly concerned about my relationship with Harry Potter," he snapped.

Dumbledore shook his head. "We both know that is no longer the case, Severus. He has come to trust you a great deal; imagine for a moment how he must feel about what he has learned."

Snape was silent for a moment, taking a drink from his own goblet. "I made an oath to protect him. So long as he is alive I am doing my job," he spat vehemently. "Further than that I couldn't care less about the brat."

Dumbledore shook his head sadly.

Harry turned around and left.

oOo

Hope everyone enjoyed this chapter. You should all be appreciative that it actually has a title that isn't a number. The next one should be up within a week. Number 49.

Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter: nxkris, ILoveCockatiels, zoey\_zink, SHuntress, x Alice and Rosalie 4 Eva x, BadGirlgoesworse, Makurayami Ookami, Stygian Styx, D4rkPr1nz, tiny099, Persidie, oceanlover14, pink-fogg, ams71080, Slytherin66, GuinevereRose, KayVon, Niffler41, ching965 and

QuannanHade: I have a friend who plays the cornet. It sounds nicer than a trumpet, I reckon. It could be that the first part of that chapter seemed a bit different because I wrote it quite a while ago, so maybe my writing style has changed a bit. Thanks for reviewing, as always : )

## Take Back What's Yours

He returned to the dormitory after that, and was getting into bed when his toe hit something hard under the bed. He stifled a curse and bent down, dragging out one of the books that Snape had loaned him. Scowling at it, he tossed it onto his bed and then went to his trunk, digging through it until he found the other book. The Half-Blood-Prince's book was in his bag and the Charms, Chants and More Cheese, Please, was on his bedside table. He added those to the pile and then picked up the stack of four books.

He was on his way to Snape's office when he abruptly changed direction, heading instead to the Chamber. Once there, he made his way through the tunnels, shivering in the cold. He was wearing only his pyjamas, and had forgotten shoes. The stone floor was cold and rough, sending chills up through his feet into his body.

He arrived at the waterfall painting and then, because he knew it would annoy the hell out of Snape, he stepped through into the Potion Master's private chambers.

He paused when he stepped out, thinking that he probably should have checked the Marauder's Map to see if Snape was in his rooms. He could hear nothing though (not that Snape was the sort to sing or make loud noises though), and assumed that he was still in Dumbledore's office.

His clothes had dried completely by the time he moved over to the coffee table in Snape's lounge, which was good because it was absolutely freezing in the dungeons.

Harry dumped the pile of books on the coffee table, gave the room a scowl, and then stepped back into the painting, though he was reluctant to leave the warmth given off by the fire in Snape's living room.

His feet were white and numb with cold by the time he got back to the Tower and he stood in front of the fire til they warmed, staring into the dying embers and brooding silently.

He went to bed after that, but he slept badly and woke early, the sky still pitch black. It was snowing outside, the white powder gathering on the outside of the window sill.

He tried to fall asleep again, but in the end he rose at four in the morning and quietly dressed. If he was going to be up at such an ungodly hour, then he was going to make good use of his time. He donned his invisibility cloak, stuck the rolled up Marauder's Map into his pocket and headed off to the Chamber.

He used the Entrance from the Gryffindor Common room, but instead of going to the library, he instead took the turn that would take him to Dumbledore's office. He reached the small room where three doors led to Dumbledore's office, private chambers, and into the corridor where the Gargoyle was. He went up the stairs through the door to Dumbledore's office and then stopped.

Before he stepped through, he unrolled the Marauder's Map and tapped it with his wand. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good," he murmured, and black lines crawled outwards from the tip of his wand, covering the parchment with a map of Hogwarts.

He scowled briefly at the small dot labelled Severus Snape before checking Dumbledore's office. It was empty, but it appeared Dumbledore was in his private chambers, which were accessed from the door behind Dumbledore's desk. Harry had been in there once before, some time ago now, and from memory, it looked as if Dumbledore might be in bed. Of course it was four in the morning, so it was most likely that was where he was.

Keeping his cloak and the Map with him, he stepped through into the circular office.

He scanned the rows of trinkets around Dumbledore's office for the Pendant, and not seeing it, he moved to the nearest shelf and began a closer inspection.



There was very little light, so he cast a wandless lumos. It was a little dimmer than if he used a wand, but that was good because as soon as the room lit up a bit, he saw Fawkes asleep on a stand, his head tucked under his wing.

Luckily the light didn't disturb the bird, and Harry turned his attention back to the shelves, his blood thrumming loudly in his ears.

He went slowly around the office, his eyes moving over each and every trinket and treasure on the shelves and side tables. When he didn't find the Pendant, he moved to Dumbledore's desk.

It was a mess of books and quills and parchment and more gadgets, and it took Harry a good five minutes to sort through everything on top of it.

The first drawer of the desk opened easily, but after rifling through the contents, he quickly determined that what he was looking for wasn't there.

The second drawer was locked tight. He tried an Alohamora on it and the door glowed for a split second. He tried it again and found it still locked. He'd seen no keys in his search of the office, and he didn't know any other unlocking spells, so he left it and hoped he would find the Pendant elsewhere.

The next drawer proved to be locked also.

He turned around, facing the door behind the desk that led up to Dumbledore's private chambers. He didn't want to risk them being warded, so he went back to the door that led to the winding staircase. Instead of opening it though, he hissed "Open," and the door opened of its own accord, revealing steps that led back down to the small room.

He went down and then took the route to the private chambers tumbling out of a painting onto soft carpet. He landed as quietly as he could and then paused, listening for any sound. He scoured the rooms, leaving the bedroom for last.

The Pendant was still nowhere to be found. He felt extremely dismayed. He debated going into the bedroom, and had almost decided not to when he looked through the tiny gap in the door and saw the Pendant, right there, hanging from a stand on Dumbledore's bedside table.

He nearly let out a yell of triumph, but settled from clenching his fist tightly. He pushed the door open as slowly as he could so that it didn't squeak, but like last time he'd been here it was well oiled and made no sound at all. He tiptoed around the bed, making only the lightest noise on the carpet. He felt as if he would be caught out at any second, but he reminded himself that he was invisible.

He let out a long, low breath when he reached the bedside table. Biting his bottom lip, he reached out and slowly unhooked the chain from the holder it was dangling on.

He held it up above his head, dangling it on a finger, and it shined dimly in whatever meagre light was coming in the window. Suddenly, he tilted his hand wrong and the Pendant dropped to the floor with a light thud, and a tinkle as the chain fell on top of the Pendant.

Harry froze.

Dumbledore rolled over and gave a snore, facing Harry now.

So slowly, trying not to let the cloak rustle, he bent down and picked the Pendant up again, cringing at the tinkle of the chain.

After what happened with Malfoy when they'd been duelling, he wasn't letting the Pendant out of his sight again. He'd desperately wanted it to apparate Malfoy to the infirmary, and he'd spent a good few hours half blaming Dumbledore for the whole thing. He knew that was irrational and that it had been his fault, but he was still angry that he could have gotten Malfoy there sooner if he'd had the Pendant.

He just hoped Dumbledore hadn't stripped it down like they'd done to his broomstick, and that it still worked.

He slipped it around his neck, relishing in the familiar cool weight against his chest. Closing his eyes, he focussed on the seventh year boys' dormitory in Gryffindor Tower. He felt the Pendant grow warm and the snake began to slither in its entwined pattern a bit faster. When he opened his eyes, he was standing right next to his bed.

He fell asleep immediately, one worry off his mind.

...

Two hours later Harry woke and went down to breakfast. It was the first day of the holidays and they would be leaving for the train shortly, but Harry sat eating his cereal with little enthusiasm, still feeling bitter and upset over the truth he'd learned the previous day. Word had spread that some sort of altercation had occurred between him and Snape, but he had refused to answer anyone's questions, even Ron and Hermione's.

According to Hermione, they'd only heard muted voices through the stone walls and thick wooden door, and then Snape had come in with a bruise forming on his chin, ordered them to open their text books and read, and then left again.

He'd then returned two minutes later looking no different to normal, though he'd apparently been particularly sour that lesson, and taken twice the amount of points he usually did.

Harry made an effort to at least appear happy, since he wasn't going to be seeing them for a week and it was Christmas, and they had a good conversation until it was time to go. They went back up to Gryffindor Tower to collect his trunk, and Ron and Hermione waited outside while he got it.

They went down to the Entrance Hall and they waved him off, then he, Seamus, Neville and Dean found an empty carriage to take them to Hogsmeade Station.

They spent the ride doing the usual things like playing Exploding Snape and discussing the upcoming holiday, and it was just after

dark when the train pulled into King's Cross Station and they disembarked.

There were a row of fireplaces along one wall of the station so that people could Floo out, and after Harry had said goodbye to Ron, Ginny, Dean, Neville and Seamus, he headed over to the one with the shortest line.

He was pretty sure that there would be a member of the Order hanging around, and sure enough Tonks appeared when there were only a few people ahead of him in the line.

"Heya Harry!" she said brightly, and Harry couldn't help but smile at her, even though he knew she was there to harass him about what he was doing.

"Hi Tonks," he replied.

"Where are you off to then?" she asked, cutting to the chase. "Last I heard, you were joining the Weasleys for Christmas."

He shrugged. He'd wondered why Dumbledore hadn't called him up to his office to talk to him about what he was doing over the holidays. "I don't know where you heard that. I'm going to stay with another friend for the week."

Tonks nodded brightly. "Sounds like fun. Want to tell me where that is?"

Harry grinned ruefully. "Not particularly."

"You know Harry, if you want a bit of space no one is going to begrudge you that, but we really do need to know where you are, for your own safety," said Tonks, stepping closer and lowering her voice.

"I think I'm safe if no one knows where I am," he replied shortly, noticing that there was now only one person in front of him in the line.

"Only several trusted Order members will know where you are, Harry."

“Including a trusted Order member who told the Prophecy to a reporter?” he shot back.

Tonks looked slightly affronted by that. “No one from the Order-”

“I’m not saying that it was someone from the Order for sure. My point is that things get out when people know. If no one knows, no one else even gets the chance to find out.”

The person in front of Harry stepped into the emerald flame and disappeared with a whoosh.

“I don’t want people hanging around, even discreetly, watching me, while I’m trying to enjoy my holiday. Besides if people start turning up there regularly, it just gives other people a chance to follow them.”

Tonks sighed and stepped back as Harry dragged his trunk into the Floo.

He gave her one more friendly smile which she returned weakly, before calling out his destination.

“Diagon Alley!” he shouted, and after an unpleasant ride, he stumbled out of a fireplace in the Alley, his trunk spitting out after him. He sat for a while inside Florean Forescue’s Ice Cream Parlour, wondering if he’d been followed here.

After he finished his hot ice cream sundae, he pulled out his wand and shrunk his trunk, stuffing it under his jumper.

Then he pulled his invisibility cloak over his head and left. He was fairly sure it would be difficult for someone to follow him with it on, and he apparated once he’d rounded a corner into another street. He didn’t go far, just back up the street to the Floo, where he ducked ahead of someone in the line and Flooed to the Irish Wizarding Alley.

There was no way anyone could have followed him, so as soon as he was out of the Owlery he whipped off his cloak and stuffed it into his

pocket. It was too late now to go to the farm this evening, so he found a small muggle inn outside of the Alley and paid for a night.

As he lay in bed trying to get to sleep, he wondered how Snape had reacted when he'd found the books, realising that Harry had somehow thwarted his wards that were specifically designed to keep Harry out. He almost smiled at the thought.

One good thing about having returned the books before retrieving the Pendant was that if, as he suspected, Dumbledore hadn't learned how to use the Pendant, then he might think that the Pendant wasn't what had allowed Harry to apparate to within Hogwarts at all.

oOo

Early the next morning, he left the inn and went to an empty street where he disappeared.

He appeared with a pop on a dirt lane near the McKenna's farm. As soon as he breathed in the fresh air, he felt as if a huge weight was lifted off his shoulders. He felt so free here, like he could do anything he wanted and be anyone he wanted to be.

He started off along the track, humming as he went. The sky was mostly clear, although the ruts in the track were filled with water, indicating that it had been raining earlier.

He hadn't been walking long, only about twenty minutes, when a low rumbling filled the air and an old red truck rolled into view over a small hill.

Harry smiled in recognition and waved, and the truck slowed to a halt, the engine idling. The window rolled down, and Niall stuck his head out. "Where might you be off to Harry?"

"To see you all of course," he replied, and the farmer chuckled.

"Going the wrong way then, aren't ye?" said Niall with a grin. He jerked his head towards the passenger side. "Get in."

Feeling foolish, Harry ducked his head and jogged around to the other side of the truck, climbing in.

“Where’s your things then?” asked Niall, putting the truck back into gear and starting off again.

“Er... I left it just off to the side further up here,” he lied, and then after a few minutes pointed out a random place where there was a stand of trees between the edge of the road and the field on the other side.

He jumped out of the truck and hurried over to the trees, then quickly pulled out his trunk and returned it to its normal size, just as Niall arrived to help him carry it back to the truck.

They hoisted it up into the tray and then set off once more, arriving at the farm a few minutes after that.

“Don’t tell anyone I was walking the wrong way,” said Harry with a grin, and Niall smirked back at him.

Leaving Harry’s trunk in the truck, Niall led him into the house where Ana and Aislinn were washing up after breakfast.

Aislinn threw the tea-towel in the drainer and pulled him into a hug when she saw him, a brilliant smile on her face. Harry kept the hug short, feeling a bit awkward with her parents there.

“Hello Harry, it’s good to have you back,” said Ana, wiping her hands on the tea-towel that Aislinn had discarded.

“It’s good to be back,” he replied, smiling.

“Aislinn told us you’d been by to see her one day.”

Harry nodded. “I was in Galway for the day, so I thought I’d drop by and see her.”

“Yes, but it was only for a few hours after school one day, wasn’t it Harry?” said Aislinn, a strong suggestion in her voice that he agree with her.

“Oh, yeah.” He nodded his head in agreement. “I was busy all day, and then had to catch the bus to the ferry in the evening, so it was only for two or three hours I guess.”

“Well, I’d best be off. Have something to eat, Harry,” said Niall, clapping him on the shoulder. He winked at Ana and smiled at Aislinn, and then left the kitchen to tend to the farm.

“We’ve some eggs and bacon left over from breakfast,” said Ana, going to the fridge and taking out a plate.

“I’ll put some toast on for you,” said Aislinn, jumping up and grabbing a loaf of bread and a knife.

“I’ll leave Aislinn to look after you then, and I’ll see you two later. Is there anything either of you want while I’m in town?”

“No thanks Mrs. McKenna,” replied Harry, while Aislinn just shook her head.

Ana left picked up her handbag from the cupboard and left through the screen door. Moments later Harry heard the engine on the car start and the sound of it driving away down the driveway.

There was a hiss of bacon hitting the hot pan, and Harry tore his gaze from the door and looked to where Aislinn was making him something to eat.

He stood up and moved over to where she was prodding at the bacon in the pan. He walked up behind her and slid his hands around her waist, pressing his chest against her back. “Missed you,” he whispered in her ear.

She turned her head and smiled up at him. “Missed you more.”

He ducked his head lower to capture her lips, pulling her tighter against his body. The egg flip clattered onto the bench as one hand came to rest over the top of his and the other snaked up behind his neck.



He deepened the kiss for a moment before she broke away, blushing slightly. "Harry, your breakfast is going to burn!"

Harry pouted at her and then smiled when she did, dropping a kiss on her neck and stepping back to lean against the big wooden table.

"Don't think I'll be doing this for you every time you arrive late for breakfast," she said, waving the egg flip in his direction.

Harry just smiled. "When did you get back here?"

"Oh, just yesterday afternoon. I haven't even unpacked yet." She turned away for a moment to arrange his food on a plate. "What do you want to do today?"

Harry dropped into a chair when she brought his breakfast over, and she took the one next to him.

"We could go outside," she continued, "If it doesn't start raining again."

Harry eyed the sky outside dubiously, seeing that the clouds had closed in again. "I'll eat quickly, hopefully the weather holds out a while."

Harry ate while Aislinn told him about how her end of term exams had gone and then they headed out into the yard.

"Just let me take my trunk up," said Harry, and they went to the truck, each grabbing one end of the trunk and carrying it to the barn.

Up in the loft of the barn, Harry found Hedwig sitting on the bar at the head of his bed, and she hooted happily when she saw him.

"Hey girl," he said, holding out his hand for her to nip affectionately. Aislinn came over to pet Hedwig too, and the owl happily allowed her feathers to be stroked. "She's so friendly," she commented, as Harry poured out a bowl of water and dropped a handful of owl treats on the bench.

“Only to people she likes,” he replied, smiling.

They went downstairs again and Harry exchanged his shoes for a pair of boots before they stepped out into the snow.

They walked silently across a snow covered field to where Harry remembered a medium sized dam being. Some of the trees that surrounded it had dropped their leaves, and the ones that hadn't had leaves dusted with white snow.

The ground beneath them wasn't as snowy as the field, but it was covered in fallen leaves and a bit muddy.

They came to stand at the edge of the frozen over dam, and Harry pulled his hands out of hers, instead wrapping his arm around her shoulders. She gave him a smile and then leaned her head against his chest.

“Have you been ice skating lately?” she asked suddenly.

“Ice skating... no, I've never ice skated.”

“Never! Well, we have to change that. Come on.” She took off, tugging him along in the direction of an old stone shed with a tin roof that he'd never noticed before.

There was no door and no light, but Aislinn knew where she was going and quickly opened up a large steel chest with a rusty latch.

“These should fit you,” she said, slinging a pair of chunky skates in his direction and then pulling out a smaller, daintier looking pair for herself.

Harry sat down on an old tire and tugged off the boots he was wearing. He pushed his feet into the leather skates and pulled the stiff, salty smelling laces tightly, tying them in a bow and double knotting them.

They walked awkwardly across the snow to the dam again, Aislinn laughing when he tripped and went to his knees finally taking pity on him and lugging him up by the arm.

He wasn't much better once he got on the ice. He tentatively placed one foot on the frozen surface and then, when it stayed in place, put his other foot next to it. He moved too fast though; his back arched sharply back and he threw himself forward, overcompensating and crashing painfully to his knees, wincing at the impact.

Aislinn stifled another laugh and helped him up again, holding his arm until he'd gained his balance.

"I usually have good balance," he grumbled, which was true. You needed good balance to fly a broom as well as he did.

"Don't worry Harry. No one skates for the first time without falling over at least once."

Harry took a deep breath and slowly slid one leg forward and Aislinn did the same. Then he slid the other forward, wobbling and nearly stumbling when his skate hit a small bump in the ice.

"Come on, a bit faster than that. It's easier the faster you go, easier to stay balanced."

Aislinn moved away, dragging him with her with an arm around his waist, and he had no choice but to do what she said.

For a few moments he thought he was going to topple over, but Aislinn was right; going faster, it was much easier to stay upright and he began to get into a good rhythm of left-right-left-right.

"See, you're getting it," she said, smiling. "Much better!" She went to draw away, but he grabbed at her hand, pulling her back.

"Don't go too far," he said, squeezing it gently, and she smiled happily. "So, what did you get me for Christmas?"

Aislinn wiggled her eyebrows. "What makes you think I got you anything, Harry?"

Harry shrugged innocently. "I suppose it doesn't matter if you didn't, since I didn't get you anything." In truth, he hadn't gotten her anything yet, but he was fully intending to.

Aislinn punched his arm playfully, but it nearly made him fall flat on his face. "You'd better have gotten me something."

"Or what?" he asked, smirking at her.

Aislinn sniffed and glanced away from his smirk. "Or I shan't kiss you again."

Harry stopped. He was paying too much attention to Aislinn to skate on the uneven surface and was in serious danger of falling over and taking her with him. He pulled her around in front of him and wrapped his arms around her. She tilted her face up to his. "Guess I'd better make the most of this while I've still got the chance then," he said softly, dropping his face closer to hers.

She stretched the last little distance and their lips met in a gentle kiss. After several minutes Harry opened his eyes and looked around. "I can't see a thing."

Aislinn snorted and pulled off his glasses, wiping the mist off of them that had formed from the heat of their combined breaths.

She tilted her head, staring at him before she placed them back on his nose. "You have the most beautiful green eyes," she said.

Harry smiled, secretly pleased. "Just so you know, most guys don't like being referred to as beautiful."

She rolled her eyes and slipped his glasses back on.

"That's better." He looked around and then back at Aislinn. "I can see you again."

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At quarter to one they headed back towards the house for lunch. They were just passing the barn when Harry saw an owl fly overhead carrying a large brown package.

"I'll meet you in the house," he said, and detoured to the barn.

The owl was sitting on the bench, being glared at by Hedwig when he reached the top of the stairs, but fluttered over to the bed when he appeared.

He stroked the owl's feathers before untying the package. There was no indication of who had sent it, so he didn't think it was a Christmas present. He pulled at the twine that held it together and flipped it over, pulling at the wrapping.

'Charms, Chants and More Cheese, Please' was revealed as he pulled away the last layer of waxy brown paper.

Pursing his lips, he shoved it out of sight under his pillow. He knew what Snape was saying by sending it: that just because Harry was angry didn't mean he had to give up on what was important.

He didn't want to think about any of that at the moment anyway. It was the second day of the Christmas holidays; surely he was entitled to a break?

He provided the owl with water and owl treats and went back down to Aislinn.

oOo

Hope everyone enjoyed : )

I'm planning for Harry to be heading back to school at the end of next chapter, or maybe the beginning of the one after. Should update within a week.

Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter: christoh13, ching965, KayVon, Alexiad, nxkris, zoey\_zink, oceanlover14, D4rkPr1nz, cyiusblack, ams71080, Jensindenial3516, BadGirlgoesworse, pink-fogg, Slytherin66, rasul, black-heart-green-eyes, Lexor, GryphonWonder14, Makurayami Ookami, Red Death, HPMiller and

Gypsy Peanut: Yes, kittens in mortal peril always makes me feel better....haha thanks for reviewing : )

QuannanHade: lol I have no problem with vague reviews. Always a pleasure to read your reviews, vague or otherwise : )

DamienMitchels: Haha I'm sorry : ( Glad you're liking it so far, hope you enjoy the rest of the story. Thanks heaps for reviewing bro : )

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j...k... L ...m...n

That night Harry retreated to the barn after dinner, happy to go to sleep early. It had been a long day. The living space above the barn had been painted since last time, something he hadn't noticed earlier. There was still a lingering smell of fresh paint too, so he reckoned that the light blue coating had only been done recently. He looked at the room more closely and noted that there were several improvements over the last time he'd been here: the window was clean, there was a different heater, and looking down, he saw that he was standing on a rug.

All in all, it made the room quite homely and comfortable. He changed into his pyjamas and slipped into bed, glad he had turned the heater on earlier.

LLLLLLL

The next morning Harry was up early helping Niall do things around the farm.

He was happy to find that he was still nearly as strong as he'd been when he'd left the farm last time, and the work wasn't nearly as draining as it had been in the first few weeks of the July holidays.

Harry was enjoying the work and fresh air, and it seemed that hardly any time had passed before Niall waved him over and they went back to the truck to head back for lunch.

The rumbled their way through the field and onto a track, and were shortly parked in the yard again.

Harry jumped out of the truck, just as a shadow crossed the sun. He looked up and was sure he saw the tail end of an owl go through the window into the barn.

"I'll be back," he told Niall, and hurried into the barn, forgetting to take off his boots and leaving clumps of mud all the way up the stairs and

on the rug. He pulled his wand out and cleaned it up quickly before turning to see who had arrived.

Errol had already joined Hedwig, and both were asleep with their heads tucked under their wings. He gently untied the parcel that Errol had brought, so as not to wake the old bird. He felt a bit guilty for making the bird travel all that way; he should have reminded Ron how far away he was going to be.

He was just about to leave when yet another owl soared through the window. He hoped Aislinn and her parents weren't growing suspicious about the inordinate number of birds that were visiting him.

This one was a large, handsome one with a well-groomed look about him. He was carrying a small package, and as soon as Harry untied it, the owl soared away before Harry could even offer it water or Owl Treats. He added what he assumed was a gift to the pile on the bench and then left the barn.

At some stage during the morning Niall had brought a healthy looking lamb into a small paddock near the house and Harry saw it when he rounded the corner towards the house. He walked over to the fence lining the paddock and called softly to the lamb. To his surprise, it looked up from the grass it was chewing on and took a step closer.

Smiling, Harry kneeled down, plucked some grass out of the dirt, stuck his arm through the wire and waited patiently. The lamb trotted back and forth a bit before sidling closer and tugging at the grass he was holding. The small thing blinked its big eyes happily at him as it quickly devoured the food.

"You're a cute little thing, aren't you," Harry told it. "Do you have a name?"

It butted its head against his hand, looking for more grass.

Niall noticed him patting the lamb. "Don't get too attached to that one," he called as he swung some tools into the back of the truck, which was parked nearby.



Harry looked up. "Why?"

"He's for the slaughter. Christmas dinner."

Harry's mouth dropped open and he looked back at the little animal.

Niall chuckled. "Where did you think lamb chops came from son?"

Harry gave the lamb another pat. "Bad luck, little guy. I guess I'll see you Christmas Day." he jumped up and went to help Niall lift a few things into the truck, and then they headed into the house for lunch, a bit later than usual.

This time Harry remembered to take off his boots before he went inside, leaving them at the door.

He entered the warm kitchen, followed by Niall, who spoke. "Might be that we have to go without meat this Christmas, Ana." He continued when she looked up, frowning. "Harry's gone soft on the lambs."

"I have not!" he defended, his cheeks brightening. "I just thought it was cute."

Aislinn giggled. "I didn't know boys said 'cute.'"

"I'll come out Christmas morn and find the gates left open, all the livestock freed," said Niall, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Harry scowled and Ana flicked Aislinn with a tea towel. "Hush, both of you. And you two sit down and have something warm to drink while I finish lunch."

Harry sat in his usual seat next to Aislinn and squeezed her hand under the table.

"Dad, does Harry have to help you with anything after lunch?" She looked hopefully at Niall. "He is here as our guest this time, remember?"

“Oh well, I guess Harry’s earned himself a break. A hard worker, this one.”

Aislinn smiled triumphantly and as soon as everyone had finished eating she dragged him up to her room.

As soon as the door shut behind them, Aislinn was in his arms. He happily wrapped his around her and pulled her up, pressing his lips softly against hers. They spent a good part of the afternoon up there, doing little else, though as Aislinn warned him, if her parents asked, they’d been playing scrabble, which she’d won hands down.

LLLLLLL

The next day was the day before Christmas Eve and Niall and Ana were going into the nearest town for a bit of last minute Christmas shopping, and Aislinn had insisted on going along to meet up with some friends. She invited Harry along but he declined, saying he had some school work he should start.

As soon as they’d gone, Harry apparated to Galway. The wizarding alley was the busiest he’d seen it; the other times he’d been there it had been almost dead. He supposed there were a lot of people like him doing Christmas shopping.

He had no idea what he was going to get Aislinn, but he wanted it to be something nice. The only girls he’d really bought gifts for were Hermione, who would never get anything better than a book and Ginny, who had always seemed to like anything that amused her, which pretty much included anything from Zonko’s.

Apparently Aislinn did quite well in her classes, but she seemed more the outdoorsy type to him, and he definitely couldn’t get her anything from Zonko’s.

He walked past an apothecary, a robe shop, a hat shop and a broom shop. Perhaps he would have to go into muggle Galway to get her something, though he liked the idea of getting her something to do with magic.

He looked across to the row of shops on the other side and saw a wand shop, a pet shop, the Owlery and a Gringott's branch.

He sighed and kept walking; none of those were any good. Like Diagon Alley there were many side streets to explore, but he hardly had the time. He was beginning to think he would have to however, that or go into muggle Galway, because he was nearing the end of the Alley and still hadn't seen any shops that sold anything remotely muggle.

He was about to turn around and head back the other way when a small doorway caught his eye. It was squeezed between a shop and the one next to it, and the sign on the door read 'Illesfier Gold.'

Intrigued, Harry turned the knob and pulled on the door, revealing a narrow wooden staircase leading downwards. A soft golden glow came from the bottom, flickering slightly.

The door closed and all sound from the street was blocked. He hadn't realised how loud it had been out there, but the silence in the shop was extremely peaceful. He looked around and found that it was a jewellery shop.

His footsteps seemed too loud on the stairs, but as soon as they hit the carpet at the bottom they were muted and there was once again no sound.

Illesfier Gold was a jewellery shop. Display cases ran all around the room, and there were others in the middle of the floor as well. The shop seemed to be lit by candlelight only, and that reflecting off of the jewellery bathed the room in an unreal glow.

He didn't think he'd seen Aislinn wearing any jewellery except the time he'd visited her at school. Then, she'd been wearing a chain with a cross on it, but he hadn't caught sight of it since she'd been back on the farm.

He wondered if she didn't like jewellery or if she just didn't wear any because she spent a lot of time helping her father around the farm.

He stepped over to a case in the middle of the room, passing the cash register. "Everything in here is goblin-made and of the finest quality," said the attendant softly. "Quite expensive."

Harry nodded. He knew he could afford it, but he wondered if it would be weird to get Aislinn anything too expensive.

Girls supposedly liked jewellery though, and she didn't need to know how much he spent.

Most of the jewellery was very much like muggle jeweller except for some that had glowing stones or pieces that moved, like the Pendant.

There were a lot of nice pieces, but he didn't see anything that really caught his eye until he'd been looking for quite some time.

"Can I get a look at that one," he asked, pointing at the one he wanted. The attendant silently opened the glass cabinet and removed the bracelet, handing it to him reluctantly.

It looked like a solid band, but when he held it, it kept its shape for a second before it almost seemed to melt, and moved smoothly like a fine chain. A beautiful, intricate design was engraved into it. He turned the bracelet over in his hands. As it moved, the design seemed to glow brighter than the band itself, and he wondered if it was a trick of the light or something to do with magic in it.

It was a beautiful, fine bracelet, and he imagined it would look lovely on Aislinn's wrist. The only problem was that, although it looked like it would fit around her wrist, he couldn't see any way she could possibly push it over her hand. Perhaps it was a child's bracelet? He scowled slightly and looked up at the attendant. "Do you have this in a larger design?"

The attendant pursed his lips and held out his hand for it. Harry dropped it into his palm. "Hold out your arm," ordered the attendant, and Harry did so.

To Harry's surprise, the attendant simply pulled the band apart, then wrapped it around Harry's wrist, letting the two ends meet. The gold

fused together, and when Harry looked closer, he saw no gap or fracture in the gold. All of a sudden, the band solidified, the design flashing brighter for a second. It now sat, perfectly moulded around the shape of his wrist, no longer moving like a chain. It was quite a snug fit, but Aislinn's wrist was skinnier than his, and it would fit her easily.

It was perhaps not quite a 'muggle' as he would have liked, but perhaps he could explain by saying it was magnetic or something. He had a feeling gold wasn't magnetic, but maybe Aislinn wouldn't know that?

Now that he'd seen it however, he simply couldn't imagine anyone else but her wearing it, and he knew he had to get it. He pulled it off, and it once again became chain like until the attendant placed it back on its stand in the display case.

"I'll be back shortly," said Harry, and the attendant rolled his eyes, as if saying 'I've heard that before.'

Leaving the shop, Harry hurried back to the Gringotts branch, hoping he'd be able to get money from there even though his vault was in London.

The bank was far smaller than the one in London, but it was quite busy and he had to wait a while before he could get some service.

Like the London branch, it was run by goblins. He approached the counter. "Er... my name's Harry Potter. I need to get some money out, but my vault i-"

"Key?" cut in the goblin, not even glancing up from the paperwork he was filling in.

Harry pulled his key from around his neck and handed it over to the goblin, who finally looked up to inspect it.

"Drakrog will take you to your vault," he said eventually, summoning another goblin and handing him the key.

Drakrog walked briskly away without a word and Harry followed, easily keeping up with the shorter man.

To Harry's surprise, he was led to a cart which looked exactly like the ones used in London. As soon as Drakrog had climbed in, the cart started to move and Harry jogged and jumped in before it could get too fast.

They turned a corner as their speed started to accelerate and Harry's eyes widened; they were approaching a wall of fire that stretched across two rows of tracks. Harry's eyes widened as they hurtled towards it, but he wasn't particularly scared, just a bit nervous perhaps. The fire was emerald green, and Harry supposed it must be some permanent Floo link to London.

They continued to accelerate and by the time they passed through the flame, they were absolutely hurtling through the close-walled corridor.

He closed his eyes as they passed through the flame, feeling the gentle heat from it. When he opened his eyes again they were still in the same rock-walled type passage way, only this one had passageways leading off of each side. They took a couple of turns, and Harry supposed he must have been on this track before, though it didn't look familiar.

After a few more minutes they drew to a stop outside Harry's vault, and twenty minutes after that he was back in Illesfier's Gold, much to the surprise of the attendant.

He paid for the bracelet and stowed it safely in the bottom of a deep pocket. He was walking along, thinking about getting something to eat before he went back, when it suddenly occurred to him that he should probably get something for Niall and Ana as well. He had no idea what to get them though, but in the end he settled for a moderately priced bottle of wine. He banished the label, which branded it as elf made wine, and hoped that they liked the taste. He himself had never had elf made wine, but he'd heard it was good.

With everything he needed, he apparated straight back into the loft, and was met by Salazar's soft voice.

"Harryyy, I'm sssoooo cold," hissed Salz. Harry placed a hand on the coiled snake, and pulled back, surprised. He felt very cold, even for a reptile.

"You sshhould have told meee ssssooner Salazzzar!" He picked Salz up and moved him in front of the heater and then rushed down the stairs and outside, scouting the ground for a rock. He found a reasonable sized one and carried it upstairs, then pulled out his wand and enlarged it a bit. He cast a warming charm on it and placed it next to the heater, then placed Salz on it.

Salazar gave a hiss of pleasure. "That'ssss nicccce and cossssy."

Harry turned the heater on, noticing the cold. He couldn't believe he'd gone and left the snake with no way to get warm.

"I'm sssorryyy Sssalazar. I ssshhouldn't have left you here."

"It'ssss alright, Haryyyy. Niccce and warm now."

"No it isssn't. I ssshhould take better care of you than that."

He pulled a chair over to the bench where the heater sat, and gazed at the snake for a moment. "You're getting sssooo big," he told Salz, who hissed with pleasure. "If you keep growing at thisss rate, you'll be assss big assss the basssilisssk ssssoon."

He knew Salazar would never be anywhere near that big, but Salz liked to hear it nonetheless. He gave another happy hiss.

LLLLLLL

He was closing the lid of his trunk after changing into his pyjamas when 'Charms, Chants and More Cheese, Please' caught his eye. On a whim he pulled it out and took it to his bed.

By the light of the lantern he began to read. Snape hadn't marked any particular point in the book, so he started with the introduction, his interest spiking when he read the bit about chants.

'Chants are used for more complex or difficult magic where the result cannot (easily or at all) be obtained by one single spell, but by a group of spells woven together. Many old rituals involve the use of chants, but in modern magic they have greatly fallen out of use but for in a few select fields.

Healing is a notable area of magic where chants are still common place, given the complex nature of the field.

Most anything that can be achieved with a simple spell can be achieved with a chant, though for most purposes, a simple spell is powerful enough. Many spells that are used today were once done with chants, mostly before the advent of wands or other focuses of power.

Chants are more difficult to perform than typical spells, as the wand movements must flow together, as must the words spoken. If there is a break in the words or the flow of the wand movement, the chant can be broken.

Once mastered however, a chant is exceedingly more powerful than a normal spell.'

He wondered if it might be good to use a chant for his charms project. He had a good list of possible ideas for spells, but he hadn't considered combining them at all. Voldemort was powerful, so it was likely that a one word spell wouldn't be strong enough to remove the Mark.

He crawled to the end of his bed and leaned down, pulling out the parchment on which he had written possible spell words. He could use several of these now; all he would have to do is match them with wand movements that flowed together.



Suddenly exited, he pulled out his rune dictionary and opened it to the 'B' section. Running his finger down the page, he sought out the rune for banishment.

LLLLLLL

"Happy Chrissstmasssss Salzzz," hissed Harry, stretching in his bed. It was almost too comfortable to get up and open his presents.

Salz replied by slithering off his rock and onto the bed, flickering his tongue against Harry's neck and continuing on to curl up on the suspicious, book-shaped present from Hermione. "Presssentsss...." Harry grinned at Salazar's enthusiasm. "Alright, alright," he grumbled, pushing himself up and reaching for the pile, holding out his arm for Salazar to climb up. The snake settled himself around Harry's neck, waiting expectantly for Harry to open something.

He opened the letter from Ron first and read it out loud for Salz's benefit.

To Harry,

Merry Christmas mate. I got you some polish, because you said you needed some, so I hope you didn't go and buy your own before you opened this.

Harry rolled his eyes and grinned. "Ssshould have opened the presssent firrsst, Salzzz."

Hope your holidays going well. It's all been good here at Hogwarts, except we've been asked a couple of times if we know where you are. It's a bit annoying to be honest. You'd think after the first few times they'd realise we either don't know or aren't going to tell them.

Anyway, apart from that it's been quiet here. Malfoy's still here though, and they make us all sit at the same table for dinner, so I have to look at him while I eat.

Harry snorted. Somehow he didn't think that would put Ron off his food.

Charlie came to visit yesterday, before he went to the Burrow. He was really interested in hearing about those dragons that have been flying around. He wanted a detailed account, and I spent about an hour telling him about it. I think he wanted to try and identify them by a description, and what I realised when I was telling him about them was that the green one might not have been a dragon at all! I know it looked like one, and Hermione tells me I must have just missed them, but I reckon it didn't have any arms. The thing is, is that all dragons have arms, and if they don't then they're not a dragon at all, and the only animal that's similar is a wyvern.

Harry grinned and looked sideways at Salazar. "Uh, oh. I've been found out." He was surprised that Ron had noticed that when it seemed no one else had, but he was also pleased. Ron was doing well in Care of Magical Creatures, and it seemed like he knew his stuff.

He went back to the letter.

I promised Charlie I'd keep an eye out for him. It'd be cool to see them again anyway.

It's pretty good having the castle to ourselves, but Hermione's not into Quidditch, so hurry up and get back so we can play!

From Ron.

Harry grinned and put the letter aside, reaching for the gifts the Weasleys had sent him. He'd got the usual joke things from Fred and George, jumper and mince pies from Mrs. Weasley, and some Honeydukes products from Ginny. Ron had gotten him more polish for his broomstick, which was good because he was running low.

He'd given Ron a huge bag of Honeydukes products, which was pretty much the most thoughtful gift you could give Ron, and a new cage for Pigwidgeon, since Seamus had sat on the old one and broken it.

He turned to Hermione's letter.

Dear Harry,

Merry Christmas!

I do hope you're being careful and looking after yourself, as the Professors seem quite concerned. I'm sure you can look after yourself though, and that's exactly what I told them when they asked.

I suppose Ron probably told you what's got him and Charlie so excited – he's hardly stopped talking about it. They're both quite taken with the idea that it might be a wyvern, but I personally find it difficult to believe. After all, there hasn't ever been a confirmed sighting of one – they're really just myth.

I suppose Charlie's right that if it is a wyvern we shouldn't mention it to people. Imagine the excitement if we did.

In one way I think everyone deserves to know, but realistically there would be those who would want to catch it and chain it up somewhere or even kill it, wouldn't there?

Harry shivered at the thought. He certainly wasn't keen on the idea that people might want to collect him for study or potions ingredients.

It's given me a bit of research to do over the holidays however, since I've no homework left and was feeling rather bored. Not that it isn't good to spend some time alone with Ron, but you know him, all he wants to do is play Quidditch.

Lately he's taken to dragging me down to Hagrid's to look at whatever monster Hagrid has chained in his yard. Blast Ended Skrewts don't bother him anymore. It's a pity his enthusiasm doesn't stretch to his other subjects.

Thank you for the gift. I haven't opened it yet of course, but I know I'll love it. Enjoy the rest of your holidays.

Love, Hermione.

He unwrapped the present and found a book about Quidditch strategy, and he remember that he'd been browsing through it one Hogsmeade weekend.

He opened a bag of rock cakes from Hagrid and a letter from Remus before grabbing the last gift, the unmarked one that had been delivered by the owl he hadn't recognised. It gave no indication of who had sent it after he unwrapped it either.

A wand holster tumbled out of the plain brown paper. There was a tag on it that indicated it was made of genuine leather, dragon skin to be precise. The tag also said that the holster was self adjusting, allowing it to be worn by 'wizards of all shapes and sizes.'

He slipped it on, letting it hang around his wrist. It instantly shrunk to fit snugly. He pushed it further up his arm, and the band lengthened to accommodate the extra bulk.

It would be perfect for his animagus transformations; now he could take his wand with him when he transformed.

He realised with a start that the holster could have been from Malfoy, probably was in fact. He hadn't even considered getting something for the Slytherin, and wondered now if he should have.

Pondering whether it was too late to get something now, or not, he pushed the holster up under his sleeve and stuck the wand into it. He finally got out of bed and dressed, wished Hedwig a happy Christmas and filled her bowl of Owl Treats extra full, then took the bracelet and bottle of wine and left the barn.

oOo

I know not much happened in this chapter, but who does work on the holidays? Certainly not me... next chapter will have some interesting stuff happening though.

Posted a bit later than I thought I would, but I'm soooooo busy with uni. Will do my best to update by this time next week.

Big clap for the 800th reviewer oceanlover14 yay!! Big Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter: ching965, Slytherin66, DarkWillow, HPMiller, ams71080, zoey\_zink, fhippogriff, BadGirlgoesworse, nxkris, cyiusblack, call015, -Yuna's Reincarnation- 1, GryphonWonder14, AnnF, La Mariane, Makurayami Ookami, christoh13, Basil to Blithe, tanith-4486, black-heart-green-eyes, oceanlover14, Sweet Heavens, Stygian Styx and

QuannanHade: Well, the way I imagined it was that the Headmasters office has always been the headmasters office, and it didn't occur to me that there wouldn't have been a headmaster in the beginning. Just a little mistake : ) And you're right, it wouldn't be the Pendant of Slytherin if he didn't get it back : ) Thanks for reviewing, hope you get your computer fixed!

## Surprise Visitor

There was the smell of baking wafting through the yard as Harry walked the short distance from the barn to the house, so he knew that at least Ana was already up.

He entered the kitchen to find all three of them seated around the kitchen table.

“Merry Christmas, Harry dear,” greeted Ana, smiling warmly.

“Merry Christmas,” he replied, holding up the bottle of wine he’d bought for them.

Ana took it off his hands, smiling. “That’s lovely Harry, thank you.”

“We’ll have to have some with dinner tonight,” added Niall. “Or lunch.”

“That we will,” said Ana, setting it next to another bottle of wine that was sitting on the cupboard already.

“Shall we go into the lounge now?” asked Aislinn, already getting up, and Niall chuckled.

“Ah, my little girl – still eager for her presents.”

Aislinn blushed, but pulled Harry into the lounge anyway, kissing him quickly on the cheek and then yanking him down to sit next to her near the tree.

Niall and Ana took seats in the armchairs, and Niall began to hand around presents, surprising Harry when he handed one to him. “From all of us,” he said.

He hadn’t been expecting anything from Niall and Ana.

He ripped away the wrapping to find a box, and removing the lid, he saw inside a pair of new boots like the kind Niall wore. He could smell

the new-leather smell of them, and they shined; the leather dully and the eyelets brightly.

“Thank you!” he said sincerely, smiling at Ana and Niall. “They’re really great. Better than those joggers I’ve been wearing around.”

Ana laughed. “That’s exactly what Niall said when we bought them.”

Aislinn leaned over then and dropped another present onto his lap. “To go with the boots,” she said, and he took it, tearing away the Christmassy paper, revealing a coiled up black leather belt. He’d never owned a belt before, always just using a tie of some sort to keep Dudley’s oversized pants up.

“Every man needs a good belt,” said Niall, as Harry inspected the silver buckle.

A few more presents were passed around, from Aislinn to her parents and vice versa, and then they all sat talking for a while before starting to clean up all the packaging that was strewn about.

“Well I’m going to go and make breakfast,” smiled Ana, standing up. Niall jumped up as well.

“I’ll give you a hand, love.”

They left the room, and Harry stood and walked over to where Aislinn was stuffing wrapping paper into a rubbish bag and knelt down in front of her.

“You don’t think I didn’t get you anything, do you?” he teased.

She blushed. “No! Well, you didn’t have to Harry. I m-”

Harry pulled the bracelet out from behind his back and held it up in front of her, effectively silencing her.

“Harry, thank you!” she breathed reaching up and dangling the bracelet in front of her eyes.

As soon as she took it, it melted, hanging like a chain would. "It's beautiful," she murmured, gazing mesmerised at the golden bracelet. Harry smiled, glad that she liked it.

"I've never seen anything like it."

"Here," he said, reaching out for it. "Let me put it on."

He tugged it gently out of her fingers and pulled it apart. He wrapped it around her wrist and held the two ends together so that they melded. The engraving glowed momentarily, and then the metal hardened.

"How does it do that?" asked Aislinn softly, holding it close to inspect it.

Harry smiled and leaned in to whisper in her ear. "Magic."

He felt her answering smile, and pressed a kiss to her cheek. Aislinn turned her head up and met his lips once, then whispered back, "This is magic."

Harry tangled his fingers in her hair, and kissed her long and slow. She melted into it, letting him deepen the kiss. The trail of her hands down his back sent shivers up his spine.

A small gasp escaped her when Harry gently pushed her back onto the carpet.

"Harry, my parents," she breathed.

"They're busy," he breathed back, settling a hand on her stomach. His fingers found the edge of her shirt, and he ran one along her smooth skin.

There was a bump from the hall and Harry broke off the kiss, expecting someone to walk in, but no one appeared.

"Nervous, are you?" asked Aislinn, smirking.



“Well, I would prefer not to end up like that lamb.”

Aislinn laughed and punched his chest lightly. He grabbed her hand, holding it up to inspect the bracelet. “It looks beautiful on you,” he said, pressing a light kiss to her wrist.

“It looks ridiculously expensive. I hope you didn’t spend too much on it.”

Harry stood up and pulled her to her feet, wrapping his arm tightly around her waist. “I could never spend enough on you,” he replied. “Come on, let’s go and eat.”

Before she could ask any more about how much it had cost, he dragged her into the dining room.

...

After breakfast, the four of them sat around talking for a while before Ana got up to call relatives and begin the lunch arrangements. She waved off any help, so Aislinn and Harry went back to the lounge, taking a bottle of coke and a bag of chips with them. Aislinn turned the radio on and found a channel that was playing decent music.

Harry couldn’t remember the last time he’d had coke. He’d snuck it a few times at the Dursley’s when he was younger, but he couldn’t recall having any since starting at Hogwarts.

He poured them both a glass and then spluttered when he took the first sip, causing some to drip from his nose. He’d forgotten how bubbly soft drinks were.

Aislinn gave him an amused look and calmly took a sip of her own drink.

A song that Aislinn clearly liked came on the radio at that moment, because she grabbed his hand and pulled him out of his seat. “Dance with me Harry.”

“Dance?” repeated Harry uncertainly, pulling her closer. “Er...”

Suddenly there was a knock from the front door, and Aislinn spun towards it, grinning. "Oh, that'll be my cousin. I forgot to tell you, he's coming for lunch." She headed out of the room to get the door, calling over her shoulder, "I warn you, he can be a bit exuberant, but I'm sure you'll like him. He's very friendly."

He heard the door open, and a moment later Aislinn laughed.

The door closed, and muted voices came from the entryway.

Harry turned as he heard them getting closer.

Aislinn entered, followed by a blonde-haired boy with an impish smile.

Harry choked on his coke, spluttering and trying to get control of himself.

"Seamus!"

Seamus stopped dead in the doorway for a second, and then his face split in grin. "Harry Potter, what are you doing in me cousin's house?" he yelled, walking over and slapping Harry on the back.

"I'm visiting for Christmas."

Aislinn followed Seamus over, her eyebrows raised in surprise. "You two know each other?"

Harry nodded, wondering if he should elaborate. Did Aislinn know Seamus was a wizard?

"Wait a minute! You aren't this boyfriend she's been going on about, are you?"

"I hope so," said Harry, grinning stupidly, pleased with the thought that Aislinn had been talking about him.

Seamus turned to Aislinn. "Harry and I go to Hogwarts together."

Harry stared from Seamus to Aislinn. "So you know about... m – oof!"

Seamus had elbowed him quite hard in the side. Harry took that as a no.

"So Harry here knows all about my school, and there's no need to talk about such a depressing subject on Christmas day, is there!" Seamus grinned broadly at both of them, then slung an arm each around their necks and dragged them into the dining room, pulling out three chairs on one side of the table and settling himself in the middle one.

"Aislinn!" called Ana from the kitchen, and she left to see what her mother wanted.

Harry leaned over to Seamus and asked lowly, "Is it just you coming, because what if your mum or something recognises me?"

"Nah, don't worry," replied Seamus in his usual exuberant voice. "Mam's gone to me Uncle Liam's place already. I'll be headin' over there after lunch. Though, it is tradition that this lot all come to visit Uncle Liam on Boxin' Day, so she might see you then, if you come."

"Maybe I should give that a miss, then." The last thing Harry wanted was to be recognised by someone. He couldn't risk anyone finding out he was here.

Seamus nodded absently, focussing his attention on a plate of biscuits that were on the table.

"So why doesn't Aislinn know about magic? Do her parents?"

Seamus shook his head. "They're related on me Dad's side see, and me Mam's the witch. Technically, people are only s'posed to tell immediate family, otherwise ev'ryone'd know, wouldn't they?"

"I guess," muttered Harry. "Haven't you ever wanted to tell them though?"

Seamus shrugged. "I wouldn't mind tellin' Ash. She's was like me best friend when we were kids. Mam's pretty strict about it though." He

shrugged again. "I'll tell her one day I s'pose. Part of the reason I never told her was cos I couldn't do magic outside school; she'd never have believed me. She'd have to believe me now, though, since I can show her some."

"Mm."

"It's safe for you here, right Harry?" asked Seamus, suddenly serious.

Harry knew what Seamus was asking, and he felt suddenly guilty that his being here might put Aislinn and her family in danger. He nodded confidently. "No one knows I'm here, not even Ron and Hermione."

Seamus looked at Harry for a silent moment and then nodded once. Aislinn came back at that moment and took the seat on Harry's right, ignoring the one Seamus had pulled out earlier, though he didn't seem to care; he was too busy digging through a small bowl of mints.

Harry sat silently while they caught up, giving the odd nod when they looked at him for comment. He wasn't sure how he felt about Seamus knowing Aislinn. When he'd first come here, it was because he wanted to get away from the wizarding world, if only for the holidays.

And Seamus was such a big link to that life that it annoyed him to think he hadn't gotten as far from it as he'd have liked.

Since he'd gotten to know Aislinn though, he wanted to tell her things about him, and he felt guilty about keeping such a big part of his life from her.

He sighed; it was all a bit frustrating. He was supposed to be able to relax here, and now he just felt guilty and confused, on top of the things that had happened just before he'd left Hogwarts. He was upset about Snape, and thoughts about Snape and the Prophecy had never been far from his mind since he'd found out. On top of that he was now worried about endangering Aislinn and her family by being here, and about whether or not he should tell her about him being a wizard.

He was shaken from his thoughts by the smell of fresh bread, and noticed Ana putting a freshly baked loaf of bread on the table.

When she walked out, Harry got up and followed her into the kitchen to help carry plates and food into the dining room.

After two trips, he placed a large mince pie next to a steaming bowl of soup, and everything was set.

“Oh, the crackers!” exclaimed Aislinn, jumping up and pulling a box from out of a set of drawers against the wall.

They were passed around and the room was filled with a chorus of ‘Merry Christmas’es and bangs as the Christmas crackers were pulled.

“Not quite as exciting as the wizarding kind,” whispered Seamus in his ear, as Harry picked an orange party hat and mini pack of playing cards off of the floor.

Seamus proceeded to read them all a dirty joke that was apparently from the Christmas cracker, though Harry seriously doubted that was where it had come from, and Seamus refused to show Ana the piece of paper when she asked.

They had all began to eat when the phone rang. “I’ll get it,” said Aislinn, jumping up and going into the kitchen. She came back a minute later and sat down again. “The Ryans. I told them we’d call back after lunch.”

Ana nodded. “Oh, Harry, I forgot to say earlier: you’re quite welcome to use the phone if you want to call your family; no need to ask.”

Beside Harry, Seamus choked on his soup.

Harry smiled at Ana. “Thanks, I might try them after lunch.”

Ana nodded and then shook her head in resignation at the other boy. “Seamus dear, you must learn to eat slower. How many times must we tell you?”

Seamus grinned and used a chunk of bread to scoop soup off of his shirt.

...

After lunch the three of them went for a walk, Harry wearing his new boots. They were a perfect fit, and extremely comfortable.

They walked past the small pen in the yard, the lamb conspicuous in its absence. Slow-cooking in Ana's oven, probably.

Seamus slung an arm around his shoulder and leaned in close. "So tell me Harry; just how well do you know my cousin then?" He wagged his eyebrows suggestively.

Harry reddened and attempted to stutter an answer. Aislinn didn't seem particularly bothered by the question, merely yelling Seamus' name and slapping him on the shoulder. Harry thought her cheeks did look a bit red, though that could have been from the cold.

Seamus laughed. "Just trying to look out for me favourite cousin."

Aislinn shoved Seamus into the snow, and a snowball fight quickly erupted.

Twenty minutes later, they were all damp and puffing. They collapsed in the snow together, and Harry put his arm around Aislinn, pulling her close.

Seamus pulled a small flask out of his jacket and uncapped it. "Merry Christmas," he toasted them. He took a swig, and then passed it to Harry.

Harry coughed slightly on the drink. Seamus was a big fan of Firewhisky.

He passed it on to Aislinn. She downed it easily. Perhaps Seamus regularly shared the drink with his muggle relatives? He quirked an

eyebrow at her when she passed it back. "What?" she asked defensively.

Harry smirked and shook his head. "Nothing."

They sat in the snow talking and laughing until it started to get windy, and they got too cold to sit out there.

"Well, I'd best be off," said Seamus as they neared the house.

"Already?" asked Aislinn, sounding disappointed.

"Yeah, Mam's expecting me at Uncle Liam's by four."

They walked around to the front of the house where a rusty old car was sitting in the driveway.

Seamus hugged Aislinn, waved to Harry and slid behind the wheel.

Harry leaned in the window and said quietly, "Don't forget, you didn't see me here. Not a word to anyone."

"Cross me heart and hope to die," replied Seamus with a grin, turning the key. The engine rumbled loudly to life and a puff of black smoke came from the tail pipe.

"You need a new car, cousin," said Aislinn, kicking a dirty front tire.

"S'what I told Santa, but he just didn't come through for me." With one last grin, Seamus drove the car around and took off, honking the horn. The car backfired loudly as it disappeared down the road.

...

He was pulling on his pyjamas pants when someone knocked on the railing of the stairs that led up to the loft of the barn. He pulled them up and walked over, seeing Aislinn half way up, wearing big black boots with her pyjamas.

“What are you doing up here? I thought you’d all gone to bed.” Harry had left the McKennas alone about two hours after dinner, so that they could have some alone time as a family. He’d never done that at the Weasley’s, but it felt different here. At the Burrow there were always so many people that you didn’t know who was doing what and where, but here he felt that it wouldn’t hurt to make himself scarce for a short while.

“My parents have. I just came to say goodnight,” she replied pulling the boots off at the top step.

Harry looked at the clock and saw that it was just past midnight.

Aislinn slipped her arms around his neck, leaning up to give him a slow, soft kiss.

“Thank you for the bracelet,” she whispered.

Harry smiled. “Thank you for the belt.”

“Do you like it?”

Harry nodded. “I’ll wear it tomorrow.”

Aislinn smiled brightly and looked around the room. She saw Hedwig and detached herself from Harry, walking over to the bench.

“Hello again, Hedwig,” she said, stroking the owl’s white feathers. Hedwig gave a low hoot.

Aislinn yawned widely. “You should go to bed,” he told her. “You look tired. I was about to anyway.”

Aislinn walked back over to him. “I want to stay up here with you,” she said, running her hands down his chest and making him shiver pleasantly.

Harry swallowed and glanced quickly at the bed. “It’s not really big enough for two,” he replied, his voice sounding a bit hoarse.



Aislinn smiled at him. "I don't mind." As if to prove it, she sat down, leaning back against the railing and making herself comfortable.

"I think your parents might mind."

Aislinn rolled her eyes. "They're asleep, and speaking of parents, you never called your family today."

Harry shrugged and turned away briefly to close the lid of his trunk before she saw anything suspicious. He hoped she would drop the subject, but when he turned back, Aislinn was sitting forward and looking at him closely.

"What passed between you and Seamus at lunch today? I know it was something."

Harry sighed, letting his eyes drift to the wooden ceiling. He sat down next to her. "My parents are dead."

There was a sharp intake of breath, and Aislinn moved closer, cupping his cheek and turning his face to hers. "Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry."

"Doesn't matter," he muttered. "It was a long time ago. I don't even remember them."

"Nothing at all?"

Harry's mind drifted to what he saw when the Dementors were near. "No, nothing."

There was a brief, slightly awkward silence.

"H-"

Harry kissed her. He didn't want her to ask anything about them right now. He didn't want her to ask how they had died, or when, or if he had any other relatives, or hear any commiserations and condolences. He didn't want to think about who had killed them, because that made him angry and stressed.

He lost himself in the kiss, focussing on nothing else as he pushed her down onto the bed and covered her body with his. He relished the feel of his hands on her body, and hers on his.

She made a noise in the back of her throat that spurred him on, and he relinquished her lips and moved to her neck, showering it with kisses. She gasped loudly when he tangled a hand in her hair, pulling her head back for better access.

A pressure was building in the pit of his stomach, urging him on, urging him to get closer. His hand slipped under her shirt and ran up her side, coming to rest on her ribs.

He lifted himself up and used his other hand to push her shirt up, revealing the smooth skin of her stomach.

He gave a groan as he slipped a leg between hers, pressing himself harder against her warm body.

Both of Aislinn's hands slipped between them, flat against his chest. "Harry."

He felt her pushing against him. "Harry, stop."

He pulled back an inch. They were both breathing heavily, their breaths mingling in the air between them. "What's wrong?"

Aislinn bit her lip and looked up at him uncertainly. "You were right. I - I am tired."

Harry let out a sigh, dropping his head onto her shoulder. After a moment, he rolled off of her. He let out a long breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. A feeling of tension leaked out of him as he breathed.

After a moment Aislinn moved, sitting up and pulling her shirt down. "Well, goodnight Harry."

Harry sat up. "Hey... wait." Harry reached out and caught her hand as she slipped off of the bed. He looked guiltily at her flushed face. "I thought you wanted to stay with me," he said softly, tugging her back.

Aislinn looked up at him through her eyelashes, and he tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

He pulled her into a gentle embrace. "I'm sorry," he whispered into her hair. "I didn't mean to be so-"

"It's okay." Aislinn ran a finger down the side of his face. "I know."

Harry lay back down, and Aislinn settled beside him, her head resting on his arm.

She fell asleep quickly, but Harry lay awake, unable to sleep after talking about his parents.

Since he'd found out about Voldemort, that was who he'd blamed for his parents' deaths, but now he wondered if they would be dead at all, if not for Snape. He thought not. He'd have parents. He'd just be another Hogwarts student. He never would have grown up at the Dursleys. He sighed quietly in the dark room. He'd been through this list a dozen times now, and it never failed to make him feel miserable.

He kept going from being angry at Snape, to hating him, to wishing he was dead, to wishing he didn't know him, to wishing he just didn't care.

Of course someone must have told Voldemort the prophecy; he'd just never considered that person before. He'd never imagined that that person could have been the man he had unwittingly come to respect and depend on.

Harry sighed and rolled over. He didn't know why he was even thinking about any of this now.

He had known for a while now that Snape had, at some time, been loyal to Voldemort and must have done terrible things, and he also knew that he had, over the past two years, accepted that Snape had

done those things, and decided to forget it because Snape had spent the time since then trying to atone for his mistakes.

It seemed callous not to care about Snape's transgressions until they affected Harry personally. Was it fair to forgive someone for the things they'd done, only to hate them when you found out about one specific event?

It wasn't as if the prophecy made mention of any particular child; Snape had been friends with his mother; surely he wouldn't have passed on the prophecy if he'd known that she would be targeted?

Snape obviously felt remorse for what he had done, that much was evident to Harry. He'd even asked Voldemort not to kill her. He couldn't imagine what it would be like to cause the death of someone you cared for. Although, he had spent a fair amount of time convincing himself that Cedric and Sirius' deaths had been his fault. Is that how Snape felt?

He groaned in frustration. Was he actually trying to empathise with Snape now?

He rolled over again, pulling Aislinn against him and breathing in the scent of her shampoo. Forcing himself not to think about anything, he cleared his mind and finally managed to fall asleep.

For a short while, at least.

Harry woke, sometime in the early hours of the morning. Aislinn was still there, curled against his side. He'd been dreaming; that was what had woken him. He couldn't remember what he'd been dreaming exactly, but it hadn't been pleasant, and his scar twinged angrily.

He'd been neglecting the exercises Snape had set for him since the holidays had started, and he hoped that the break in practicing Fidelimency wouldn't set him back. Not that he was looking forward to starting it up again when he went back. The thought of spending any time at all with Snape made his blood boil.

Harry remembered a comment he'd made in Snape's office, when he'd thought Snape had told someone else about their plan. He'd said something along the lines of "What, you want me to look in a mirror?" Now, he wondered if that might actually work, and he had a strong desire to try. He extricated himself from the bed, making sure not to wake Aislinn, and opened his trunk.

He dug around and found the only mirror he owned. It was the two-way mirror that Sirius had given him. He stared at it sadly for a moment before focussing on his own reflection. He'd matured a lot in the last year, his jaw strengthening so that his face was no longer so skinny looking. His hair remained the same, messy and dark, and his eyes were still the same green.

He traced a finger over his scar, remembering the splitting pain that he'd felt last time he'd done this.

He took a deep breath. He didn't want to feel that pain again, but he had to, didn't he, if he wanted to get rid of Voldemort once and for all?

He had completely forgotten that Aislinn was behind him as he settled into a more comfortable position on the floor.

He lowered his defences nearly all the way, because he was better at Occlumency than he was at Legilimency. Then, discreetly pointing his wand at the mirror, he began to whisper the incantation for Legilimency, but something happened then that Harry hadn't anticipated, and he was completely unprepared for it.

Something whipped through his mind, breaking past his weakened defences easily. It was ruthless as it swept through his memories. He gathered his defences and brought them up against the force, but before he could stop it, it had gone of its own accord.

Harry dropped the mirror with a gasp.

Someone had Sirius' second mirror, and that someone was a skilled Legilimens.

He was sure it hadn't been Voldemort; his scar did not hurt. The ruthless feel did not feel like Dumbledore. It could have been Snape, but it hadn't felt familiar, though it had all happened so fast he hadn't really had time to examine the presence.

"Harry?"

He twisted around, surprised. "Yeah?"

"Get back in bed, you must be freezing. What are you doing?"

"Nothing," he whispered, getting up and crossing over to the bed. He slipped in next to her, glad for the warmth. Aislinn snuggled against him and leaned her head on his chest. She fell back asleep quickly, but Harry was too concerned about what had just happened to sleep again.

He supposed it had been stupid; he should have considered what had happened to the other mirror. Perhaps it was a member of the Order, who had picked it up from Grimmauld Place. Perhaps it was a Death Eater, who'd picked it up at the ministry after Sirius lost it while duelling. Harry just didn't know, and it worried him that they might have seen something important, like where he was or who he was with.

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Harry was on edge the whole next day. He had no idea who had been on the other side of the two-way mirror, nor did he know what they had gathered from his mind.

They dragged themselves out of bed early, since Aislinn and her family were going to one of her Uncle's for the day. He'd been invited, but been reluctant to go knowing that Seamus' family would be there. After the incident with the mirror, he had decided he definitely couldn't go.

He made his excuses to Niall and Ana, feeling a bit guilty, but there was nothing to be done about it. Aislinn seemed to be annoyed at him, but he had important things to do today.

As soon as they left, Harry hurried up into the loft. "Hey, girl. I have a letter for you to deliver for me."

Hedwig hooted happily and fluttered over.

"Hang on, hang on. I have to write it first." He pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill.

Dear Remus,

I was wondering if you knew what had happened to the two way mirror Sirius owned? Can you find out for me and let me know. It's really important.

Harry.

He tied it to Hedwig's leg and she gave his finger an affectionate nip before flying out the window. He closed it behind her to keep the room as warm as possible and then headed out into the yard, taking one of his textbooks with him.

They'd gone over wards in Defence, and then again a bit more in-depth in charms, but that was only recently and he hadn't had very much practical experience.

He could hardly ward the whole farm, but he could do the house, and perhaps the main yard area if he had time.

He didn't know how effective his wards would be, but he had to do something, in case whoever had Sirius' mirror was someone who wanted to hurt him.

He propped the book open on a rock and read through the chapter on wards. After reading through it several times, he set off, marking out a perimeter. He used a roll of orange electrical tape from the shed to mark out the path.

The warding spell he had chosen was the strongest one that he had in the textbook, and it was done in layers, requiring him to walk the

perimeter several times. It was still early, and he imagined that he had till night before the McKenna's returned.

Bearing that in mind, he picked a perimeter that took him quite a wide radius around the house. The path took him nearly an hour, but it was worth it if

When he got back to where he'd started, he stuffed the electrical tape into his pocket and slid his wand out of the leather holster he'd gotten for Christmas.

He sighed and set off, chanting the spell for the ward as he walked towards the next bit of electrical tape, which was tied around a fence post. It was going to be a long day.

He took a short break after the second walk around the perimeter. He was already feeling tired, not having gotten much sleep the previous night.

The whole time he found himself keeping watch out of the corner of his eye, expecting at any moment to see the corner of a black robe flicking out of sight or a silver mask glinting in the sunlight.

He also felt off; wrong, somehow. Now that he thought about it, he'd been feeling weird since after dinner. He still felt guilty about how he had reacted to Aislinn the previous night, but he wasn't really sure why he had. He wanted Aislinn, of course. That part hadn't been strange. The need to control her; that was what hadn't felt like him, and it worried him.

Shaking the thoughts off, he set off once again to complete the ward.

.oOo.

This chapter just didn't want to get written. But, finally done! Hope everyone liked it. Should the person on the other end of the mirror be one of the good guys, or one of the bad guys? Let me know what you want, because I could go either way at the moment, and I haven't decided yet.



Next chapter: Harry goes back to Hogwarts.

Everyone who has been reviewing has been so great : ) Thanks to ching965, Sweet Heavens, marauderaddition1, zoey zink, nxkris, cyiusblack, ams71080, black-heart-green-eyes, Oversized Bucket, -Yuna's Reincarnation -1, bookivore, Stygian Styx, HPMiller, The Truth Factory, chrisguy9017, taintedlegacy, Slytherin66, JustAnotherParallelDimension, Makurayami Ookami, Satsukifujin, Laby Black-Malfoy, BadGirlgoesworse and

QuannanHade: The way I see it, none of the other founders knew that Slytherin had all those password over-rides for places like the headmaster's office. Thanks for the review : )

mika: Hey! Glad you like it, and good to know you like my characterisation. Thanks heaps for reviewing : )

GypsyPeanut: rofl sounds like an interesting speech there. Thanks for the review!

## Men in Black Dresses

The McKennas arrived back the next morning, having stayed the night at their relative's place.

The first he knew of them being back was when he woke to Aislinn shaking his shoulder lightly. He opened his eyes and then squeezed them shut; the light shining in the window was far too bright.

He sat up and squinted at her. "You're home. What time is it?"

"Just past twelve."

Harry looked at the clock, surprised he had slept so late. "How long have you been back?"

"A few hours. Mam says you should get up and come and get something to eat. Lunch will be ready soon."

Harry groaned and flopped back down. "Too tired," he muttered, then pulled her down onto the bed next to him. Aislinn propped herself up on her elbow and leaned over him, her hair cascading around them in a curtain.

She placed a kiss on his forehead, then the side of his face, then his jaw. "I missed you while we were gone."

"Missed you too," he replied, leaning up to kiss her.

After a good few minutes, Harry decided he really should get up. He stood and pulled Aislinn with him, not breaking the kiss until they were both up. His stomach rumbled. Aislinn grinned. "Come on, let's get you something to eat."

She turned around while he got changed.

As Harry finished tying his laces, she picked up the mirror from where he had dropped it on the floor the previous night. She turned it over, and then back again, staring into the mirrored surface. "Is this yours?"

"Yeah." Harry reached out and took it off her, ignoring her surprised expression. He placed it face down on the bench and took her hand, giving her a smile. "Come on, let's go. I'm starving."

She frowned at his abrupt manner, but let him lead her down the stairs and outside.

After lunch, Aislinn took him horse riding.

"It's like flying," she said, standing up in her saddle after galloping around a paddock while Harry watched.

Harry smiled wryly. He found it slow and awkward; the horse was difficult to handle, and he couldn't go anywhere near as fast as he was used to.

...

"The strangest thing happened just earlier," remarked Niall when everyone was nearly finished dinner that night. "I was heading back to the truck, from the Far Field, and I could have sworn I saw a man in a dress, walking down the road. Then I looked again, and he was gone."

Harry choked on his mouthful of food.

"A man walking around here, in a dress? I think you're imagining things dear."

"Yeah, Dad. The only people close to the Far Field are the Flanagans, and I doubt any of them would be caught dead in a dress."

"What colour was his dress?"

The three McKennas turned to him with amused looks, and Aislinn laughed.

Niall chuckled. "It was black."

Harry rushed the rest of his meal, but then ended up helping Aislinn wash the dishes. As soon as they'd finished, he said goodnight, feigning tiredness.

The yard around the house was dark and silent; there was no sign of anyone there. He armed himself with his wand and made a quick lap of the house, and then headed for the barn, glancing towards the dark trees around him and wondering if he was being watched.

He rounded the far side of the barn, and there, standing and surveying the dark fields, was Snape.

Harry felt a burst of cautious relief, but he also felt angry, perhaps irrationally so, at seeing his black-robed professor.

"What are you doing here?" snarled Harry.

Snape turned his head to look at Harry. "Relieving your mind," he sneered.

Harry narrowed his eyes at the comment.

Snape turned to face him fully. "You were clearly worried enough to send that letter to Lupin, as you should have been. I am here to ease your worry."

Harry tried not to let his relief show, though he was sure it must be rolling off him in waves. "So it was you."

"It was," replied Snape shortly, looking towards the house.

Harry finally understood just how good at Legilimency Snape was.

"Lupin happened to glance at the mirror, quite purely by chance. He passed it on to me so that I might determine your whereabouts."

Harry scowled.

“And have you told anyone else of my whereabouts?”

“Not as yet,” said Snape, after a moment’s pause.

“But you’re going too,” said Harry, more of a statement than a question.

“Most likely.”

“And then there’ll be Order members swarming around the place, pretending that that makes me safer, won’t there?”

“Dumbledore may post someone here to watch you.”

“I don’t want to be watched!” Harry hissed. “And if there are Order members Flooing or apparating back and forth, don’t you think people are going to notice? I’m safer without that.”

Snape crossed his arms, tapping his wand idly against his shoulder and staring intently at Harry. “Perhaps. The choice is the Headmaster’s.”

Harry snorted, and then had a thought. “Wait, no it isn’t! It’s your choice, not his. You don’t have to tell him where I am at all. I’m fine, as you can clearly see, and I’ll continue to be fine without being babysat. Since he trusts you so much, Dumbledore ought to believe you when you tell him I’m safe.”

“The Order wants to protect you, Potter.”

“The Order wanted to protect my mother, too,” he retorted, knowing the words would sting.

Snape blanched.

“And that didn’t really go according to plan, did it? If only you know, I only have to worry that I can’t trust one person. So it’s your choice.” With that, Harry stormed into the barn, in a foul mood. He didn’t know whether or not Snape was going to tell the Order where he was. As

well, his scar was bothering him. It wasn't particularly painful, just niggling at him in an extremely frustrating way.

He tossed and turned in his bed, yet again unable to fall asleep.

He felt like he'd hardly slept in the last few days and he was tired, but after two hours of staring wide eyed at the ceiling, the window, the floor, he got out of bed. He simply couldn't get comfortable.

He hadn't been flying since before leaving Hogwarts, and there was a sort of tension in his shoulders that he could only explain as the need to stretch his wings.

He picked up his wand holster, and without changing out of his pyjamas, he went downstairs and out into the cold.

Wands were far too complex objects to transfigure, which was why the automatically adjusting holster was perfect for an animagus.

He slipped it on to his ankle underneath his pants, since when he transformed he didn't have arms, and secured his wand.

Then, with a quick glance around to ensure none of the McKennas had decided to go for a midnight wander, he transformed.

Harry spent a blissful couple of hours spinning and looping gracefully through the air. The only sound was the wind and the rush of air when he flapped his wings, and as usual, flying relaxed him completely.

He began the return journey, and was close to the house and barn when movement to the right caught his eye.

Harry circled around and his sharp eyes focussed on the source of the movement. There was a person, moving slowly through one of the fields nearest the house.

The dark figure walked slowly, and Harry realised they were following the same path he had traced when creating his

With a jolt of fear, Harry realised it could be a Death Eater, trying to get past his wards. Suddenly though, the wind shifted, blowing from the figure's direction and he caught the man's scent. He relaxed slightly, recognising the smell of various potions ingredients. What was Snape still doing here?

Harry slithered closer, pushing his serpentine body through the snow with his back legs. He made no sound whatsoever. Eventually, he got close enough to hear the muttered chant coming from Snape. It was one he didn't recognise, but Snape's arm was rigid at his side, his wand pointed directly at the ground, and Harry realised he was strengthening Harry's ward with his own. Of course, it stood to reason that Snape would know stronger wards than were in his seventh year text books.

He knew it was the early hours of the new day; Snape must have spent the past few hours tracing Harry's path.

He watched at a distance, slithering slowly behind as Snape tread a now evident path through the snow.

Finally, Snape came to a stop.

It appeared he had finished, or was taking a break as Harry had. The Potions Master let out a huff of air, rolling his neck.

For a few moments he stood, hands on hips, staring at the stars. Suddenly, there was a sharp intake of breath, and his left arm tensed.

Harry heard a sigh, and realised that Voldemort was calling Death Eaters. It seemed to go on for some time though, and he could hear the steady increase of Snape's heart rate, as his breathing turned into pained gasps.

He wondered if perhaps it wasn't Voldemort calling Death Eaters. Was he punishing Snape in the only way he could reach him?

Harry was about to transform and step over to help Snape, when it abruptly stopped. After a minute Snape's breathing returned to

normal, and he slipped a large vial from some deep pocket, downing the entire contents.

Satisfied that Snape was fine, and feeling suddenly tired, Harry retreated some distance behind the man and took to the air.

He thought he'd gone far enough that Snape wouldn't see him, but a sharp gasp caused him to look around. The Potions Master had turned around without Harry realising, and he was now staring up at Harry's dark figure in the sky. Annoyed, Harry flew as fast and as high as he could in the opposite direction of the house. He didn't know how well Snape had seen him, but there were no birds anywhere near as big as a wyvern.

Harry came to land in a stand of trees, where he transformed. It was far too far for him to walk back, and he didn't want to fly in case Snape was still around.

He apparated instead, to just outside the wards on the opposite side of the barn to where Snape had been.

He saw no one as he jogged into the barn.

oOo

For the rest of his time there, Harry kept the mirror in his pocket, guiltily relieved at knowing that Snape had the other. He could be as angry at Snape as he wanted, and say whatever things he wished to him, and Snape would still come if Harry needed help.

He didn't catch sight of any Order members, so either Snape had decided not to tell them where he was, or whoever was there was doing a very good job of staying out of sight. Of course, with a disillusionment charm, that wasn't particularly difficult.

Aislinn returned to school a few days after Christmas, and Harry stayed on at the farm for two more days, spending the daylight hours helping Niall around the farm and the nighttimes flying or doing school work when he couldn't sleep.



It occurred to him on his last night on the farm that he was turning into something of an insomniac as of late, and he wondered at the reason.

Niall took a few hours out of his day to drive Harry to the ferry, and rather than apparating Harry spent the money for the trip, standing out on the deck of the ferry as he had the first time over. It was freezing, with a light spray of sea water over his exposed skin and the cold wind blowing, but it numbed the tingle he was feeling in his scar.

Once off the ferry, he apparated directly to Grimmauld Place and walked up the steps, knocking on the door.

It opened a few moments later, and Harry saw Lupin.

“Harry!” Lupin glanced sideways at Mrs. Black’s portrait and then beckoned Harry in, closing the door behind him. They walked past the curtained portrait and into the hallway.

“This is a surprise,” commented Remus, smiling at Harry, “but I’m glad you came by. We’ve all been wondering where you got to.”

“Snape didn’t tell you then?”

Remus shook his head no. “He may have told Dumbledore, I don’t know for sure, but as far as I’m aware, no one was sent to keep an eye on you, as I thought they would have been if Snape had told anyone. After all, You-Know-Who has been quite prolific in his attacks recently.”

Harry’s interest was piqued. “I haven’t been reading the paper lately. What’s been going on?”

Lupin indicated that they should walk. “Several prominent ministry representatives and their families have been murdered in the past ten days, all of them muggleborn or half-bloods. The positions within the ministry have been filled by people known by us to be death Eaters, or at least connected to them. Except one, a man called Jerrod Keller. He wasn’t on our books at all, but we’re keeping an eye on him now, having him followed to try and find out if he’s a Death Eater or not.

We strongly suspect he is, given that Thorn has placed him in a position of power within the ministry.”

Harry followed Lupin into the kitchen. “What department is he in?”

“He’s in charge of the Department for Muggle Relations, which includes dealing with any muggleborns who are a part of the wizarding world.”

Harry frowned. “What sort of damage could he do there?”

Remus shrugged as he filled the kettle with water. “We aren’t entirely sure yet, but according to Kingsley, there’s been talk sifting down through the ranks of the ministry saying Septimus Thorne is planning to bring in several radical new laws concerning muggleborns and half-bloods. Given that he’s a Death Eater, that doesn’t bode well for us at all. By the way, best not to tell anyone that I told you any of this.”

They lapsed into a brief silence, broken when Remus said, “I was just making lunch before you arrived. Do you want a sandwich?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, thanks. I’ll be right back.”

He exited the kitchen and went up the stairs to the second floor, walking down the hallway a short way.

He knocked on Dudley’s door and heard no answer. After knocking a second time, he opened the door and peered inside. Apart from the bed and the desk, the room was empty. Frowning, he went to the room Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had been in and opened it without knocking. It too was empty. He’d wondered when the Dursleys had been going to leave, but he hadn’t expected to turn up and find them gone.

When he returned to the kitchen, Remus was just putting the sandwiches on plates. Harry sat down at the table and took one. “Where are the Dursleys? Have they gone back to Privet Drive?”

Lupin shook his head. "No, your uncle flat out refused to return there. He's convinced they won't be safe. They've moved into a nice little place about half an hour's walk away. Nice area."

"Oh." Harry felt a bit guilty that he didn't know; he'd promised Dudley that he'd write, and he'd only done so about twice. "How long ago did that happen?"

Remus frowned, thinking. "Not too long ago, a couple of weeks, I guess." He smiled. "They were so rarely down in the main living areas, I hardly notice that they aren't here anymore."

"Mm. Still, must be more pleasant knowing they aren't even in the house."

Lupin shrugged. "I suppose, though they were good company."

Harry nearly choked. "The Dursleys? Good company, are you serious?"

Lupin smiled. "Well, not your uncle, obviously, but I knew Petunia when we were younger; from the times I visited Lily, so we had things we could talk about. Your cousin, too, seemed quite pleasant when his parents weren't around. He was full of questions actually."

Harry raised his eyebrows and took a sip of the tea Remus poured him. He noticed a copy of the Daily Prophet on the table and pulled it closer. The article on the front page was about one of the families that Lupin had mentioned; unlike the others, they had been murdered in public, in the middle of Diagon Alley in the middle of the day. According to the article, the father had been killed first. Voldemort had then turned his wand on the wife, who had been shielding her son, begging for him not to be harmed. She was ignored.

Harry traced over his scar, thinking.

"Harry?" question Remus, seeing the action. "Is your scar bothering you?"

Harry shook his head, his eyes still on the article. "No." He considered the article a moment more. "I was just wondering – this woman obviously died protecting her son, like mum did for me. But her son is still dead. Why was it any different to my mother dying to protect me?"

Remus face softened. "Harry, no one knows what was special about that night, but for some reason you were meant to live."

The memory of that night flashed through his mind, and he remember his mother begging Voldemort not to kill him, remembered when he'd snarled at her to step aside, remembered two flashes of sickly green light.

"He wasn't going to kill her," he whispered. "My mother, I mean."

Remus cleared his throat and glanced down into his cup of tea. "I doubt that, Harry. After all, he killed James, the pureblood, and he certainly isn't known for being merciful to muggleborns."

Harry doubted Snape would appreciate it if he told Lupin about how he had asked Voldemort to spare his mother. "No, but I remember Remus." Harry put the newspaper down and leaned forward. "He kept telling her to step aside, but she wouldn't."

Lupin's eyes grew sadder. "Yes, your mother... Lily... would have done anything to protect you; would have rather sacrificed her own life than allow you to be hurt."

"Sacrifice..." repeated Harry almost silently. "It was only a sacrifice because he wasn't going to kill her. Mum asked him to kill her instead of me, and then he did..."

"What was that?" asked Remus, leaning closer to hear better.

Harry forced a smile and shook his head. "Nothing. I was thinking I might visit the Dursleys. What's the address?"

"Number four, Worthington Lane."

“Number four again...” mumbled Harry. “Alright, well I’m going to go then. Thanks for lunch.”

Remus walked him out and gave him directions to the Dursleys and Harry set off along the street.

It took him a little less than half an hour to walk to the Dursley’s new street.

Remus had been right; it was a nice area. Apartment buildings, some made of stone and some newer looking ones, ran along each side of the road. He passed a small cafe on a corner. There were decorative trees dotted here and there along the pavement path, and the street was immaculate, with neatly trimmed lawns and not a piece of rubbish anywhere.

Harry was approaching number four when he saw a familiar figure in orange knickerbockers and a straw hat, swinging a cane around as he walked.

He’d lost even more weight that the last time Harry had seen him, and was actually looking quite trim. Probably a result of Aunt Petunia not wanting him to eat too much ‘freakish’ food.

Harry crossed quickly over the road and walked up behind him.

“Still going Smeltings then?”

Dudley looked around, a surprised expression on his face. “Harry! What are you doing here?”

Harry fell into step beside his cousin. “Came to see you, Duds. How’s everything going?”

Dudley nodded. “Really good. London is heaps better than Surrey, and it’s good not to have to go all the way back to Privet Drive on weekends. When do you go back to school anyway?”

“Tomorrow. Have to catch the train from King’s Cross.”

“Where are you staying?”

Harry considered that. He hadn’t really thought about it yet. “Maybe just at Grimmauld Place. I hadn’t really thought about it.”

Dudley slowed and came to a stop outside a nice looking place. “Well, this is it,” he said, nodding towards the door. “Do you want to come in, have a look around?”

Harry wrinkled his nose, imagining Aunt Petunia gossiping on the phone while Uncle Vernon complained loudly at the news. “Nah, better not.”

Dudley shrugged, but smiled knowingly. “Okay.”

“I’ll owl you,” said Harry, stepping down from the steps to the footpath.

Dudley stopped, his hand on the door knob. “You don’t have to, you know, not if you don’t want.” Dudley looked slightly ashamed then. “I know I’ve never given you much reason to like me.”

Harry was surprised by the almost-apology. “I do want to. I’ve just... been busy... well, not especially, but I’ve had things on my mind.” He shrugged apologetically and Dudley rolled his eyes.

Harry grinned. “See you later Duds.”

“Bye Harry.”

...

Harry headed straight back to Grimmauld Place, since he didn’t really have much else to do. This time the door was opened by Tonks, who smiled brightly at him. “Harry! Remus told me you’d dropped by earlier. Lovely to see you.”

Harry followed her into the kitchen, where several Order members were gathered around the table. He exchanged polite hellos, and let Mrs. Weasley fuss over him, though for once she couldn’t complain that he was too skinny.

A few more people arrived and Harry suspected there might be an Order meeting scheduled for that afternoon.

A half hour later, the kitchen was getting quite full, and he was asked to leave the room.

Harry started to rise, but then stopped.

“When am I going to be allowed to join the Order?”

The others around the table exchanged glances. “I don’t think it’s going to happen, Potter,” replied Moody gruffly.

Harry leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Why not? I’m of age. Fred and George got to join when they were of age.”

“Yes, well, in my opinion they shouldn’t have been allowed,” sniffed Mrs. Weasley.

Kingsley sat down opposite him and looked him in the eye. “If you were caught, imagine the information that could be gotten from you.”

“The same as could be gotten from any of you, I would imagine,” snapped Harry.

“Harry,” said Lupin gently, trying to reason with him, “Other members of the Order aren’t being directly targeted.”

“How can you say that?” he scoffed. “Of course they are! Dumbledore and Snape, for starters,” he argued, pointing in the direction of the two. “And they know more than anybody.”

“You have a unique connection with You-Know-Who. We cannot risk that he will find a way to use it to his advantage.”

“He doesn’t know anything about it! He thinks he can send me fake dreams like he did with Sirius, and that’s it.”

"I'm afraid the answer remains no, Harry," responded Dumbledore. "There is simply too much to be lost."

Harry stared around the table, looking for someone to back him up, but it seemed they were all decided.

"What the hell do I have to do to prove myself to you people? All I want to do is help." Harry slapped his hand down on the table. "He killed my parents!" No one answered him, and he felt a bit childish when he added, "This isn't fair!"

"You have known for a long time that life is not fair, Potter," said a quiet voice.

Harry's blood boiled at Snape's words and he turned to face the Potions Master, his expression livid. "Yeah, if life was fair you'd be rotting in Azkaban for the things you've done!" he yelled.

There was silence in the kitchen.

Harry stood abruptly, knocking his chair over. It hit the floor with a loud crack.

"Harry... that's unnecessary," began Remus. "Professor Snape has done a lot to-"

"Don't make excuses for the bastard, Remus. He's one of the ones that killed your best friend!" hissed Harry, ignoring the shocked looks of people in the room. Without another word Harry stormed out. He heard the door open behind him, but he didn't turn around to see who was following him. He could hear several sets of voices, but he was deaf to whatever they were saying.

He grabbed his shrunken trunk from the side table in the hallway where he'd left it and kept walking, out of Grimmauld Place and into the street. He apparated blindly before anyone could catch up with him, appearing, to his surprise, outside of number four, Privet Drive. The windows were dark and there were no signs of life.



A 'For Sale' sign was stuck in the middle of the front lawn. He'd mown that lawn and weeded those flower beds more times than he could possibly count.

Harry walked up to the front door. A simple Alohamora later and he was in the house.

His muddy shoes marked the carpet he'd vacuumed on so many occasions.

He walked around the ground floor and then went upstairs, but it was completely empty. Not one piece of furniture remained. When he glanced into the room that had been his, he saw that the window was barless.

For some reason that made him angry. He went back downstairs. The door of the cupboard under the stairs was new; there no locks on it now.

He opened it and glared dispassionately at the small space. Salazar poked his head out of Harry's collar and gave a hiss of displeasure.

Without realising it, his wand was in his hand, and he pointed it into the cupboard. "Incendio," he said, his voice void of any emotion.

He watched with satisfaction as the flames licked along the skirting boards, and made their way around to the carpet he was standing on. The carpet burned quickly, and Harry backed away, making his way into the kitchen. The walls of the house burned surprisingly fast, and there was soon smoke filling the room. He went into the lounge, and as he stood there, he heard several cracking sounds from outside. The front door opened just as flames began to lick at the carpet of the lounge.

He could see shadows through the thick smoke, and thought they were most likely Order members. He glanced once more around the room, hating every inch of it, then he apparated. There were no longer any wards on the house, hadn't been since he had left for good.

He apparated to the roof of a neighbour's house, steadying himself against the chimney. He could hear sirens, and a minute later he could see the lights of the fire truck. They were too late however. There was nothing to be done to save Number 4, Privet Drive.

They would put the fire out, but all that would be left would be an empty shell.

...

He waited until the fire trucks had left, and then apparated a final time, back to London. He walked out of the dirty alleyway he'd appeared in, donning his invisibility cloak as he did so, and walked a few blocks to King's Cross Station.

Platform Nine and Three Quarters was completely empty when he stepped through the barrier.

Not surprising, really, since the train didn't come for another twelve hours.

He slumped onto a bench, leaning against a brick pillar.

He un-shrunk his trunk, and dug around for some muggle money. He went back out into the muggle part of the station, still with his cloak on. It wasn't as busy as usual, and he looked up at the arrivals board to see the next train didn't get in for another hour.

After walking for a while, Harry found an out of the way vending machine and returned to the platform with two cans of soft drink and an assortment of salty and sugary foods.

He did a bit of work on his charms assignment while he ate, thinking while he worked about ways he could test it.

After that he talked to Salazar, but the snake went off after a while to look for something to eat.

The time passed slowly. He wanted to sleep; his eyes were itching with tiredness, but he didn't think it would be a good idea to fall asleep in the middle of the platform.

oOo

The arrival of the train the next morning woke Harry. He hadn't meant to fall asleep, though he knew he'd only gotten about three hours of sleep. Looking at his watch, he saw that students would start arriving shortly.

He stood up, gritting his teeth at the pain in his body from sleeping in such an awkward position. He brushed off the chip crumbs and picked up the empty cans, depositing them in a bin.

With nothing else to do, he put his trunk on the train and took a seat at the window.

At a quarter past eight, students began to arrive, and Harry caught sight of several Order members searching through the crowds. He was wearing his cloak, so there was no chance that they would see him staring out the window at them.

Harry sat watching the crowds of students and their parents congregating and saying goodbye to each other.

When student began finding compartments, he slid his cloak off and was shortly joined by Dean, Seamus and Neville.

Harry chatted with them for a few hours about their holidays, though he didn't say anything specific about where he'd been, and Seamus made no reference to having seen him.

After a while, Dean suggested Exploding Snap, but Harry excused himself, saying he wanted to go for a walk.

He left the compartment and wandered down the train.

Harry glanced in at windows as he passed, noting the happy looks on everyone's faces, until he passed a compartment with a lone figure sitting and staring dejectedly out the window.

He stopped, and after a moment's consideration he slid open the door and went in.

"Bad holiday?" asked Harry, pulling the blind on the window down and sitting opposite the Slytherin.

Malfoy sneered, but not at Harry. "It was an eye-opening indication of the rest of my life," he replied bitterly, not taking his eyes off the trees rushing by outside of the train.

"Yeah?"

Harry didn't say anything more than that, and Malfoy seemed happy not to elaborate, changing the subject. "I heard you're house burned down last night."

"Really?"

"Father told me."

"It was hardly my house. He does know I haven't lived there since the beginning of sixth year, doesn't he?"

Malfoy shrugged. "He still found it amusing."

Harry couldn't help the small smile that formed on his lips. "Did he?"

Malfoy must have realised the pleased tone in Harry's voice. "You don't look like you're all that bothered it. I was going to say I was sorry."

Harry doubted that Malfoy had been going to do anything of the sort, but answered anyway. "Well don't. I enjoyed watching it burn."

Malfoy looked surprised, and slightly suspicious of Harry's carefree attitude. "You were there?"

Harry's lips quirked. "Fires don't start themselves."

Malfoy's eyes opened wider. "Are you saying-"

There was a knock on the door, and Malfoy broke off.

"Anything from the lunch trolley, dears?" said the lunch lady, sliding the door open and looking in on them.

They both got some things to eat, and Harry bit into a warm pumpkin pasty. It was the first decent thing he'd had to eat since lunch with Remus the day before.

Suddenly Harry noticed Malfoy's cloak, which was bundled on the seat beside him, twitch. A small head popped out of the material, and a pale little nose sniffed at the air.

Malfoy broke a bit of the biscuit he was eating off and held it out to Gaspard, who hurried onto Malfoy's lap and began to nibble at the treat.

Harry restrained a smirk, but Malfoy caught some of the expression.

"Why do you have to get that look every time you see him?" asked Malfoy, scowling.

"What look?" asked Harry defensively, letting the smile come out.

Malfoy rolled his eyes and pulled a ball of blue foam out of his pocket. He tossed it onto the seat, and Gaspard immediately abandoned the biscuit and sprinted after the ball, which had tumbled to the floor of the carriage.

Harry watched for a while as the little ferret rolled around with the foam ball, biting it and giving the odd grunt when the ball got the better of him and he was rolled onto his back.

After a while, Malfoy said, "What did you mean by 'fires don't start themselves'? You didn't really, did you?"

Harry looked out the window. "Don't tell anyone," he said, with a tone of seriousness in his voice.

Malfoy smirked. "Well, well. Golden boy Potter is a pyromaniac. Who'd have thought?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm not a pyromaniac. I just hated that house."

"I can relate to that," said Malfoy, the bitter look returning to his face.

"What's wrong with where you live?" questioned Harry, kicking the ball around for Gaspard to chase.

"Let's just say I'm not all that fond of our current guest."

Harry's eyes darted to Malfoy's face, which was again turned to look out the window.

"Why don't you do something to get rid of him then?" he asked slowly.

Malfoy scowled. "What exactly do you suggest I do? There's no one I can tell without incriminating my family."

"You could tell the Order. They already know your father is a Death Eater."

"What, so I should give them evidence of the fact?" retorted Malfoy, giving Harry a look like he was stupid.

"Well, no, you wouldn't have to. I mean, if the Order suddenly turned up at your place, he's not likely to hang around is he? You'd just have to make sure they turn up at a point when he's not going to be there."

"Even if I told someone that he's there, they still wouldn't be able to get to the Manor. We've had the Fidelius Charm since father got sent to Azkaban. Pretty much every Death Eater knows where the place is now though."

"Oh." Harry sat back, biting his lip. "Well who is your Secret Keeper?"

The Slytherin glanced at him quickly, and then back to the window.

“My father, my mother. Me. ”

“So you could tell me, or the Order. Voldemort won’t stick around once people know he’s there and can get in.”

Malfoy flinched at the name. “So I just waltz in to an Order meeting and give them the location of the Manor?” Malfoy snorted. “Right. And then someone let’s slip that I’m the one who passed it on and I’m dead.”

“Well how do you tell people normally?”

“One of us writes it in a note, shows it to whoever needs to know. That way nobody can overhear.”

“A note could get lost,” suggested Harry.

“Everyone is told to burn it when they’re done.” That was how the Order did it too, Harry remembered.

“Y-”

“Just drop it, Potter. It’s not going to happen.” Malfoy sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, leaning his head against the back of the seat.

Harry shrugged. “Whatever. I was only trying to help.”

A while later, Harry left and went back to the compartment where his friends were.

He got changed into his robes and joined in the conversation until they arrived at Hogsmeade Station.

oOo

Talk about lickety-split updating. Hope you all liked it.

Massive thanks to last chapter reviewers (all 33 of them!): elvanyaelanesse, oceanlover14, ching965, zoey zink, RainPure, Oversized Bucket, Vanessa riddle, taintedlegacy, chrisguy9017, Lady Black-Malfoy, Lexor, D4rkPr1nz, tallica343, SHuntress, Slytherin66, JustAnotherParallelDimension, Len87, -Yuna's Reincarnation -1, BadGirlgoesworse, Badbonita, black-heart-green-eyes, DarthReign, HPMiller, Gaelyn, amber v, ams71080, Sweet Heavens, Makurayami Ookami, rasul, Stygian Styx and

Tanka: Well, it wasn't Moldyshorts lol. Thanks for reviewing!

Ornella: Good to hear! As for the question you asked about animagi, I haven't decided just yet. At least one of them, I think. Thanks very much for the review : )

QuannanHade: lol well good guess. I myself was quite surprised when Seamus appeared there. I can't remember what colour hair Seamus has in the books/ movies, but in my mind he's a blondie :P Thanks as usual for reviewing!



“Oi, mate. Guess what!” whispered Ron excitedly, leaning across the table so that no one but Harry and Hermione he could hear him.

“What?” asked Harry, chewing on a mouthful of eggs.

“We’re in the Order.”

Harry stopped eating and looked up at Ron, who was looking highly pleased with himself. He looked to Hermione for confirmation, and she nodded, also smiling. “Of course, they aren’t going to let us do anything particularly important until we’re out of school. They’ve told us just to keep our eyes and ears open among the students, but it’s something, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, we get to make official reports to Dumbledore, if we find out anything important, that is. I can’t wait to see what Malfoy gets up to,” stated Ron, shoving half a sausage into his mouth.

Harry grunted in reply. He hoped Ron wouldn’t start tailing Malfoy or anything. Not that he thought Ron had the subtlety for that, unless Hermione helped him. It would make things pretty inconvenient for Harry though, if they followed Malfoy to the Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom and saw him meeting Harry there.

He smiled weakly, but he felt that it was more of a grimace. He put his fork down and swallowed. “Since when?”

Hermione noticed the steely tone in his voice. “Since the day before yesterday. We would have written, but we were going to see you today anyway... you aren’t?”

“No.”

“Well, I’m sure if you talk to Dumbledore about it, he’ll let you join, Harry. You just weren’t around.”

“I already asked them. Yesterday. They said no.” He shot a filthy look at the Head Table.

"No! How could they say no to you?" asked Ron, clearly appalled.

"Apparently it's too great a risk," he said bitterly. "Apparently I'm not worth trusting, even though someone like Snape is."

"Bloody ridiculous!" agreed Ron.

"Maybe they're right?" offered Hermione timidly, sensing his growing anger.

Harry glared at her.

"I don't mean about the 'not worth trusting' bit, obviously. I mean about it being risky. After all, you don't need another reason for You-Know-Who to be going after you, do you?"

Ron frowned. "That's true enough, b-"

"Thanks for your support," he snarled, not waiting for Ron to finish.

"Hey, we're ju-"

"I don't want to hear it Ron," he snapped, standing up and striding out of the room. Ron called after him, but he ignored him and kept going.

He couldn't believe that they'd let Ron and Hermione join and not him. Granted, they weren't being allowed to do anything much, but they were still in. Harry had spent the last two years learning Occlumency, and those two wouldn't have a clue how to guard their minds.

He abruptly stepped into a passage way covered by a hanging tapestry and grasped the Pendant, apparating to the Chamber.

He ignored the part of his conscience that was telling him that maybe they were right as he stormed down the stairs and into the library.

He angrily paced back and forward in front of the window for a few minutes before he calmed down a bit.

He cleared his mind as Snape had taught him, and the feelings of anger and frustration were pushed down below his shields.

He caught sight of himself in the mirror above the fireplace. His face was a blank mask, no emotion getting past his shields to display on his face.

He walked closer to the mirror, pulling his wand out of its holster. He looked into his own eyes, lowering his shields. Then, pointing his wand at himself he muttered, "Legilimens."

It worked, and he appeared in his own mind, surrounded by thousands of swirling memories.

Now, all he had to figure out was how to go deeper. He didn't remember Snape really explaining that part of it to him.

He wandered around for a while, frustrated when he could not go deeper into his mind. He tried to imagine the Mirror of Erised, and it appeared, but he could not step through it.

Eventually he gave up, and was about to leave when a memory caught his attention. He called it closer, falling into it.

He was in bedroom, with a wooden cot in the middle of the floor. In front of him, his mother was holding his younger self. She kissed him once on the forehead, whispered something he couldn't hear in his ear, and placed him in the cot, and turned to face the door just as it burst open.

Harry watched as Voldemort told her to step aside and she refused, begging him to kill her and spare him. He told her, one more time, to step aside. Then he killed her.

He advanced on the cot, a cold, cruel smile twisting his face. Voldemort pointed his wand, and Harry walked over to look in the cot, just as Voldemort incanted "Avada Kedavra."

The memory ended, and Harry found himself back in the chamber, having automatically flung his barriers up.

He sat breathing heavily, dwelling on the disturbing memory.

Harry never considered it before, but it seemed so obvious now. Snape was the reason Harry's parents had died that night, but he was also the reason Harry hadn't.

oOo

He was walking along a cobbled street in the early hours of morning, just as the sun was beginning to rise. Already there were shop owners bustling around in the mist, but his disillusionment charm, which hid him even from his own eyes, made him invisible to them.

The place he wanted was near here, and hopefully it would give him an answer to one of the questions he had. One of the pieces of the puzzle, whose resolution would see him holding the thing he needed.

He was looking for it, this thing he desired very greatly to have, and it would only be a matter of time before he found it, and then, when he did, there would be no one who could stand in his way.

oOo

Harry woke, his scar burning. For once though, it wasn't the middle of the night. In fact, it was nearly time to get up. So, he thought to himself, Voldemort was looking for something. Harry had wanted to know what Voldemort was up to, wanted to help the Order, and this was what his subconscious mind had brought him while he slept.

He knew Snape had said that this hadn't been the reason for Harry learning to control his mind, but he couldn't really help what his sleeping brain did, and if it was information they could use, then surely there wasn't really anything wrong with it.

Whatever Voldemort was looking for was obviously quite important to him, for him to be seeking it out himself rather than having one of his followers do it.

He hadn't recognised the feel of the place and it hadn't looked like England. Had Voldemort's search for this mysterious item taken him out of the country?

He got up when the others started to stir and dressed silently, but when he was finished he turned to Ron, who was struggling to pull his socks on.

"Look Ron, I'm sorry about yesterday. I'm angry at Dumbledore, not you guys, and I shouldn't have taken it out on you to."

Ron blinked sleepily, as if trying to figure out what Harry was talking about, before it dawned on him and he shook his head, clapping Harry on the shoulder. "Don't even worry about it. If you ask me, it's bloody ridiculous they aren't letting you in." He dug around in his trunk for another sock, one which looked as if it hadn't been washed in a week. "Anyway, you can still help us, and we'll tell you anything we hear. Come on, let's get Hermione and go. I'm starving."

...

He was walking back to the common room with his dorm mates after breakfast when Dumbledore approached them from the opposite direction.

"Ah, Harry. Just the young man I was hoping to find. Accompany me to my office, would you?"

Harry nodded and waved good bye to his friends.

Once they were seated in Dumbledore's office and the pleasantries were out of the way, Dumbledore asked, "How has your Legilimency practice with Professor Snape been going? I must admit, I have been so busy these past weeks that I have completely forgotten to enquire about your progress."

"It's going fine."

Dumbledore nodded. "Excellent. Of course, it is imperative you continue to practice diligently."

"Yes sir," he replied tightly, realising that Dumbledore was trying to talk him out of being angry at Snape.

Sure enough, Dumbledore grew more serious and his next words were, "I have always told you Harry, that I trust Professor Snape implicitly. I had thought that this past year you, too, had begun to."

"I did," replied Harry, his tone resentful.

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "I can imagine how betrayed you must have felt when you learn of Professor Snape's role in the tragic events of sixteen years ago."

Harry shrugged, letting his eyes wander away from Dumbledore's knowing gaze to the window.

"Professor Snape's regret for what happened to your parents was very real, and very true. Great enough that he has spent much of his time trying to atone."

"So you're saying he changed sides just because he felt sorry for what happened to my mum and dad?" asked Harry dubiously.

"Love is unimaginably powerful, Harry."

"Love?" repeated Harry, frowning and looking back at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore inclined his head, but then his beard twitched. "Perhaps not for your father, but he was very close to your mother during their childhood years."

Dumbledore's eyes grew sadder. "Severus has spent a great deal of time punishing himself for the mistakes he made as a young man, particularly the mistake of relaying the prophecy to Voldemort. I can say with certainty it is something he would not have done if he had known who Voldemort would go after."

"I 'spose," replied Harry, knowing it was true. He glanced at his watch. "I should go, sir. I'm late for Transfiguration."

Dumbledore smiled at Harry and flipped open the rune-decorated cover of the book that sat in front of him, something called The Tales of Beedle the Bard. He remembered seeing the book when he'd been searching the office for his Pendant. Speaking of the Pendant, he was surprised Dumbledore hadn't mentioned it. Perhaps he assumed Harry had nothing to do with its disappearance?"

"Of course. I'm sure Professor McGonagall will understand. Just tell her it was I who was the cause of your lateness."

"Yes sir."

He made his way slowly back to the common room, mulling over his conversation with Dumbledore. He slowly packed his bag. If he had a corroborated excuse for missing class, he may as well make the most of it. He dawdled out of the common room and to the third floor classroom, arriving with only fifteen minutes of class to go.

Despite the short amount of time, he successfully managed the transfiguration they were practicing, surprising himself and earning ten points for Gryffindor. When the class ended, Harry headed down to the dungeons with Hermione and Seamus. The classroom was already open and Snape was writing instructions on the board.

Harry placed his holiday assignment on the pile on Snape's desk and then sat at a desk next to Seamus.

When everyone in the class had arrived, Snape instructed them to begin and they started making a nutrient potion.

It turned out alright, not as good as Hermione's, Harry noticed when he glanced over to compare the colour and thickness, but it wasn't too bad either.

After they'd finished, Harry was just finishing cleaning up and about to leave when Snape's voice rang out. "Mr. Potter. Stay behind please."

He considered ignoring the request, but when he reached out to turn the handle, it had locked behind the person who had left in front of

him. Snape gave him a knowing look when he turned around and slumped back into his seat to wait for the other students to leave.

Harry scowled when Snape waved his hand at the door and the lock clunked open again. He was a bit annoyed about the conversation with Dumbledore now – the old man had been warming him up.

He was apprehensive about what the Potions Master was going to say, though in a way, he thought it would be a relief to just get the whole thing out of the way.

He realised that he didn't want to be angry at Snape anymore. It was too draining and upsetting.

"Follow me to my office, please," said Snape as he swept past, the pile of essays under his arm.

Harry got up and followed, slightly stunned. He couldn't remember Snape ever saying the word please before, not unless it was part of some sarcastic remark.

Harry sat in the familiar office, and Snape sat down opposite him, lacing his fingers and looking seriously at Harry. "Can we speak as adults Mr. Potter? I would like for this conversation to remain civil," he asked quietly.

"Yes," replied Harry, crossing his arms over his chest.

"You don't have to say anything, if you do not wish to, but I would ask that you listen to what I must say without interrupting."

Harry nodded once.

Snape spoke slowly. "When I relayed the prophecy to the Dark Lord, I was to all intents and purposes a loyal Death Eater. I was ambitious, and I saw the path I had chosen as the path to success. Had I known that in choosing that path I would cause the death of one of the people I cared most about-" Snape shrugged. "If not for me, your parents would be alive and happy. You would not have spent your childhood as you did, you would not carry the weight that you do now.



I realise that an apology changes nothing, that I still did it. Nonetheless I am incredibly... unbelievably sorry for the wrongs I have done by you. I cannot-" Snape broke off. He was looking at Harry, but not seeing him. His eyes were focussed on something a lot further away.

After a moment he shook his head slightly. "I do not know how to express the wish I had never done the things I did." Snape looked thoroughly drained after his speech, a sad, distant look in his eyes.

Harry sat silently for a while. Snape's regret for what he'd done was evident, his remorse written plainly on his face.

Harry swallowed. "You know, if it weren't for you, I'd be dead too."

He said it so quietly though that Snape didn't hear.

"What did you say?"

Harry cleared his throat and spoke louder, looking Snape in the eye. "I said, if it weren't for you, I'd be dead too."

Snape's brow creased. It was evident that that had been one of the last things he'd been expecting Harry to say. "What do you mean?"

"Well it isn't like you haven't saved my life half a dozen times since I came to Hogwarts, but what I really mean is... I always wondered why my mother's sacrifice was different from the sacrifice other parents must have begged for. And I think... maybe it wasn't; it was you that made the difference. Voldemort was never going to spare those others, but he was going to spare my mother, because you asked. She didn't have to die, that's what made it a sacrifice, and that's why I didn't die."

Harry paused for a moment, letting Snape digest the information.

"You might have – unwittingly – contributed to my parents' deaths, but I know you didn't want it. And since it turns out that I owe you my life, in whatever form, I guess I forgive you."

Snape made a choked sound, and when he spoke, it seemed to take a great deal of effort. "I am not asking you to forgive me, Mr. Potter. I-"

"I know that. But I still do." Harry shrugged. "I had already, I guess. I knew you'd done things when you were a Death Eater and I didn't care, maybe because they weren't personal to me and I knew you were on our side now. Then when I found out what you did I started thinking you were the bad guy all over again, which isn't fair to you, and I'm sorry for that."

Snape shook his head. "Don't-"

"But I am!" interrupted Harry, suddenly desperately needing Snape to know that.

"No!" said Snape forcefully, holding his hand up and pinching the bridge of his nose. "No, I cannot stand for you to be apologising to me!" He stood and began pacing back and forth behind his desk. "You have had every right to hate me, to despise me, and no obligation to forgive me or apologise for being angry with me!"

"I accept your apology. Why can't you accept mine?" he asked quietly.

His calm voice seemed to stop Snape in his tracks, and he deflated, giving a long sigh. He sat down again and, looking Harry in the eye, nodded.

...

Harry felt lighter as he made his way back to the common room. It almost seemed like the whole thing with Snape had never happened. It was just such a relief to have that weight lifted, and he felt immeasurable better.

He was coming up the stairs from the Entrance Hall when he saw Malfoy ahead of him, walking by himself, a library book under his arm.

Harry caught up and fell into step beside him. "Get much flying in over the holidays?" he asked as the Slytherin looked over at him.

“Now and then. Not as much as I’d have liked.”

“Yeah me either, and not on my broom even once.”

“Quidditch leaves something to be desired these days, I must say.”

Harry chuckled. “I know what you mean. I have a free lesson after lunch, since Herbology is cancelled for today. Want to meet me in Myrtle’s bathroom?”

Malfoy held up the book he was carrying. “Give me ten minutes.

Fifteen minutes later they were standing on the courtyard that overlooked the canyon, Harry shivering in the chilly wind.

He made sure his wand was securely in his holster. “Thanks for the wand holster by the way,” he said as he walked a couple of metres back from the edge to prepare for his run-up. “I really like it. It was a great idea.”

Malfoy shrugged. “It wasn’t a present, just so you know. It was payback for the vials you gave me, and considering the holster was far less expensive, I think I got the better end of the deal.”

“Thanks for the present,” retorted Harry, grinning. Not waiting for Malfoy to respond, he took a running leap off the cliff and waited until he was nearly at the water to transform and start flapping his leathery green wings.

His sharp hearing picked out the sound of another large creature flapping behind him above the sound of the white water running in the canyon.

He flew until he came to a huge rock jutting out from the top of the cliffs, and he settled on it, transforming back into his human form. He had a fantastic view from the high point. He could see Hogwarts in the distance, and the mountains around him, most of which were covered in snow.

Malfoy flapped down next to him, transforming as well. They stood admiring the view for several minutes before Malfoy turned to him, drawing his wand and pointing it at Harry. "Duel?"

Harry pulled his own wand out and jogged to the other end of the rock formation they were standing on.

Ominous looking storm clouds were forming and the wind was picking up as they began to send spells at each other.

"You still haven't taught me that Parseltongue spell you said you were going to, Potter," shouted Malfoy, trying to distract Harry.

Harry grinned and sent the one Malfoy was talking about at the Slytherin. It hit its mark, and Malfoy nearly dropped his wand.

"That one, you mean?" laughed Harry, and he only just dodged the one Malfoy sent in reply.

Unknowingly, they were both backing towards the edge of the rock, but Harry got there first.

The rock ledge crumbled suddenly and he fell backwards, his wand falling from his hand and his arms windmilling as he tried to stay balanced.

He plummeted over the edge, but after the initial jolt of realisation that he was falling, he felt no fear, knowing he could transform. He did so, but grazed himself on the rock face because he was too close.

He gave a hiss of pain, and pushed himself away, flying back up to the top of the rock formation.

Malfoy was standing there, idly twirling Harry's wand, with a look of superiority on his face.

Harry shrunk to his human form and inspected the damage, ignoring the Slytherin's gloating comments about his glorious win.

His shoulder down to the middle of his back on the right side was one big graze, with a few deeper gouges where the rock had cut into him as he fell. His clothes were ripped too, and the cutting wind was stinging the fresh wound.

Malfoy eventually noticed that Harry was preoccupied and came closer to see what the matter was. "Ouch," he stated, leaning close to look. "You should be more careful."

Harry threw him a dirty look.

"Back to Hogwarts then?"

Harry grimaced. "Yeah."

They would have had to leave anyway; the wind was fierce now, roaring down the canyon like a wind tunnel, buffeting them about. It was impossible to stand still, and they had to lean to stay upright.

Malfoy handed Harry back his wand and he secured it in the holster, then transformed again and set off towards the castle ahead of the Slytherin.

He landed on the courtyard, very nearly colliding with the wall of the castle. He opened the door to the chamber and stepped inside out of the wind. Malfoy arrived thirty seconds later and closed the door behind him, just as Harry was gathering his bag.

"See yourself out?" called Harry. "I'm going to see Madam Pomfrey."

Malfoy nodded and Harry took the stairs two at a time, up into the Basilisk Chamber. Once there, he used the Pendant and apparated to a little-used corridor near the hospital wing.

Madam Pomfrey sighed when she saw him enter. "First day back and already I have a patient. What have you done to yourself now?"

"Just a graze," he said, twisting slightly to show her his shoulder and back. Madam Pomfrey tutted and led him to a bed. Harry stripped off his robe and T-shirt while she bustled about collecting vials.

She handed him one. "Drink," she ordered. He did so and a wonderful numbness spread over the injured areas.

The mediwitch uncapped a jar and began spreading a thick green paste over the area. It stung a bit and he winced, but it wasn't too bad after the pain-relief potion. After a few minutes she was done, and she ran her wand over the deeper cuts, chanting some healing spell as she did so.

"Now just sit there for a few minutes while the paste does its job, and then you can go."

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey. Thanks."

"You can thank me by making sure I don't see you in here again," she said sternly, before bustling off to do whatever it was she did when she didn't have anyone to take care of.

oOo

On the first Friday night back, Harry went down to Snape's office to practice Fidelimency. It was the first time he had gone to face Snape in a while and not felt any trepidation. In fact, he was quite excited at the prospect of further weakening the strength of the hold Voldemort's horcrux had on him.

The door opened moments after he knocked. "Mr Potter, come in. Have a seat," said Snape, stepping aside.

Harry walked past him and took the chair he usually sat in.

"It has been a few weeks since we have done this," said Snape as he took his seat. "I assume you have been practicing Occlumency during that time?"

Harry nodded. "I tried Fidelimency as well, with a mirror again, but I couldn't get past my memories."

Snape nodded. "That is expected, given that you've had little practice. For now it will suffice for you to simply follow me. You do not need to do this on your own time. In any case, I prefer to be with you in case something untoward happens."

Harry nodded and made himself more comfortable in his chair. Snape leaned forward and Harry's vision shifted so that he was facing Snape in the landscape of his mind.

Snape indicated that they walk, and Harry followed him. As they went, memories continued to drop away until Harry found he couldn't follow Snape any further. "Er... sir?"

Snape stopped and returned, grasping Harry's shoulder and leading him off. When all but a very few memories had disappeared, the mirror shimmered into existence in front of them. Snape released Harry's shoulder, allowing him to step through first.

Not wanting to put off the inevitable, Harry quickly located the horcrux, Snape following silently behind.

Harry spared a quick glance around the gold eddies of his own soul and then stepped into the clinging black swirls of Voldemort's.

The pain was as blinding as he remembered from the first time he had done it. Within minutes it had driven him to his knees, his hands fisted in his hair in a useless attempt to alleviate the pain.

He kept his thoughts focussed on feelings of love and happiness, trying not to let the stabbing pain radiating through his head distract him.

Suddenly Harry heard a whisper. His head whipped up, but he could see nothing, and thought he strained for any sound, he heard nothing more. The pain radiating from his scar forced him to squeeze his eyes shut again, his teeth gritted so hard he felt like they were about to crack.

There was another whisper. He was sure it was a whisper, though he couldn't discern any words. He turned his head, trying to catch the sound again.

There was a strange pressure building in his head, and he stopped trying to focus on the whisper. He centred his thoughts back on his happy memories and the pressure receded.

After several more long minutes he couldn't tolerate it anymore and he crawled on his hands and knees out of the horcrux and back into his own soul, breathing raggedly. Snape was by his side within seconds, dragging him up and helping him to the mirror.

In moments, Harry was sitting back in his chair. He collapsed forward, only to find Snape propping him up against the back of the chair seconds later, uncapping a vial of pain relief potion. Harry took it gratefully and swallowed it.

Snape sat silently at his desk while Harry waited for his head to clear, but the potion didn't seem to be working very well. After a while, he said, "I heard whispering."

"What was it saying?" asked Snape, not sounding surprised.

Harry shrugged. "Too quiet," he muttered.

"I must admit I was surprised when you made no mention of any sort of presence the first time you visited the Dark Lord's soul. When I am in yours, an image of you appears, except when you are with me. I expected something of the same of happen in his horcrux."

Harry shivered at the thought of some childish Voldemort-like apparition appearing in the swirling black magic of Voldemort's soul.

He rubbed at his scar.

"Is it paining you badly still?"

Harry nodded.



"I suppose that is to be expected." He handed Harry another vial.

"I shall brew up the potion I was giving you before. That was more effective in alleviating the pain, was it not?"

Harry nodded again, remembering the stronger potion he'd come to Snape for a few times.

"I do not have any on hand at the moment, so that will have to do for now."

Harry sat silently for a few moments, his head resting on the back of the chair while he waited for the potion to take effect. "Ron and Hermione told me about being in the Order," he said bitterly.

"Did they?" asked Snape lightly, not seeming particularly interested, but then he spoke again and Harry looked at him. "Even if you were in the Order you would not be allowed to attend every meeting. You would be in the lowest ranks of the Order, along with Mr. Weasley and Miss. Granger. If it means that much to you to call yourself a member of the Order, I am sure I can convince Dumbledore to make you an official member."

Snape's comment made Harry feel a bit silly. "Of course I want to be a part of the Order, but not just so I can say I am. I want to help fight."

"We all have different jobs to do, Mr. Potter. This," he said, indicating between them, "is yours. This is how the Dark Lord will be defeated. Others could not be a part of this, even if it were their wish to be."

"It's just so frustrating," he muttered. "I feel useless."

Snape paused a moment, as if thinking before he replied. "I can relate to that. When I was found to be a spy, I confess that for some time after, I felt quite useless to the Order. I was unable to perform the one task that only I could, a task that was most vital the Order. We are now far more ignorant of the Dark Lord's plans and it is, as you put it, quite frustrating."

Harry gave a non-committal grunt. "You're still helping though."

“As you are, in a way that nobody else can.”

Harry slumped in his chair. “You keep saying that,” he muttered.

“Because it is the truth.”

“It doesn’t feel like it though.”

“Perhaps once we have made more noticeable progress, you will feel differently.”

“I guess so,” he replied, realising that Snape was right. “It had better be pretty significant progress to make this pain worth it,” he groaned.

“Perhaps it would be best for you to return to your dormitory now. Get some rest.”

Harry started to nod but stopped when it made his head pound.

“Will you be alright to return on your own?”

Harry made an affirmative noise in the back of his throat as he pushed himself shakily to his feet.

Snape tisked and got up as well, opening the door for Harry and then stepping out into the dark corridor after him.

They set off, and Harry was glad Snape was there, because he wasn’t entirely sure he could make it the whole way on his own.

“He’s looking for something. He thinks it’ll help him win,” said Harry as they walked, remembering the dream he’d had.

Snape frowned slightly. “You saw this in a vision?”

Harry nodded. “I don’t know what it is he’s looking for; it could be anything.”

Snape nodded. "Very well. I shall pass that on at the next Order meeting. Try to remember that the purpose of you learning to control your mind was not to find out what the Dark Lord is up to."

Harry snorted. "I can't help what my subconscious mind does."

Snape looked over. "Yes, you can, Potter. You simply choose not to. Strength of mind and will power are all you need."

Harry didn't bother replying, since it would be pointless to argue and he could hardly think straight anyway.

They came to the portrait hole and Snape spoke the password to open it. Harry climbed in, stumbling over the rim a bit.

He looked back, expecting Snape to follow him, but the Potions Master simply raised an eyebrow. "I sincerely hope you aren't stupid enough to think I'm stepping one foot into the Gryffindor Common Room," said Snape, his eyes flicking disdainfully at the room behind Harry. "If you find you can't make it up the stairs by yourself, I'm afraid you're in for a rather uncomfortable night, unless you can call for Weasley to help you up."

Harry snorted and turned away, dragging himself to the nearest armchair. By the time he got there, the portrait hole was closed and Snape was gone.

oOo

Sorry for the wait everyone. I found this chapter really hard to write and I think the characterisation is a bit off in some parts too. I'm massively busy at uni at the moment, but I promise to try and get the next chapter out sooner.

Reviewers are AMAZING! Thanks to: call015, nxkris, Slytherin66, BadGirlgoesworse, Sweet Heavens, zoey zink, Lady Black-Malfoy, oceanlover14, D4rkPr1nz, JustAnotherParallelDimension, pink-fogg, WritergirlAD, christoh13, Stygian Styx, HPMiller, DarthReign, -Yuna's Reincarnation- 1, black-heart-green-eyes, Jensindenial3516,

Makurayami Ookami, Pheonix Eternia, ams71080, ShadowBreaking, Chaosborn, rasul, bybytte, ching965,

notime: glad you liked it! thanks muchly for your comments : )

marc: thanks heaps for the review : )

Gypsy Peanut: lol wish I had been there would have been funny. :P  
Thanks for the review!

QuannanHade: It is a bit of a vicious cycle, one Harry intends to break, I hope. :) Thanks for reviewing.

Caterina: Nice idea, thanks for suggesting it. Enjoy the rest of the story and thanks for taking the time to review : )

Harry was useless the next day. He still had a headache and he hadn't slept well either. Luckily it was the weekend, so the only class he had to worry about was astronomy at midnight, and he was fairly sure he would be feeling better by then.

He slept late, getting up just in time for lunch. He'd thought having something to eat would lighten his mood a bit, but he still felt short-tempered when he headed off to his class late that night.

He was a bit late, but it wasn't a class where anyone really cared.

He set up his telescope roughly, making the lenses rattle in the tube. The professor cast him a disapproving glare, which he ignored. The professor rarely bothered them with anything aside from telling them what was to be done during the lesson.

He also ignored Malfoy's quizzical look, which was more of an amused look at Harry's obvious bad mood than any show of concern.

They spent the lesson in silence, Harry mostly ignoring any attempt Malfoy made to start a conversation.

At the end of the lesson, Harry folded up his telescope and left without a word.

He had just stepped off the stairs when someone shoved him from behind. He nearly fell, but caught himself in time. His telescope was not so lucky. He heard the shatter of glass as it slipped from his fingers and fell heavily to the ground.

He turned around with a dark scowl. "What the hell, Malfoy?" he said angrily, picking the telescope up. He shook it lightly, and heard the tinkle of glass.

The Slytherin smirked. "Clumsy tonight, aren't you, Potter?"

Harry shot him a foul look. It would take at least two weeks to order in new lenses for that specific telescope, since it was an old model that he'd had since first year.

"Let's go down to the Chamber."

Harry looked at him, amazed. "Are you serious Malfoy, really? Just for fun, you break my telescope, which is going to take weeks to get fixed, meaning I'm going to have to use the shite school telescopes, and you expect me to take you down there!"

Malfoy pretended to contemplate Harry's question, a mock frown on his face. He nodded his head as he thought, and then said, "Yes, I suppose that sums it up nicely."

Harry gave him a disgusted look and stormed off.

"Hey. Hey, Potter, wait!"

He heard Malfoy walking after him, but didn't slow down.

"Merlin, I'm sorry, alright!" he called, a bewildered tone in his voice. "I wouldn't have done it if I'd known you were going to be so touchy about it. It's not my fault you dropped it anyway."

Harry grasped for the Pendant beneath his robes.

"I'll p-"

Harry appeared at the Gryffindor portrait hole and climbed through, leaving Malfoy three floors above staring at the spot where Harry had disappeared.

oOo

Harry trudged down to the dungeons for another bout of Fidelimency. He was only doing two lessons a week, but it was certainly knocking him around. He was sleeping worse than usual, and was always in a bad mood afterwards.

He knocked and the door was opened. Harry grunted as he passed Snape and sat down in his chair.

“Manners, Potter,” reprimanded Snape sternly, glaring slightly as he sat down. He appeared to be in a bad mood, for whatever reason, so Harry sat up straighter and attempted not to look as reluctant as he felt.

They began as usual, and minutes later Harry was standing in Voldemort’s soul.

He wondered how he was supposed to get from this horcrux to another, without Snape guiding him. He’d only done it in his sleep before, and so he had no idea how to go about doing it. Keeping his mind lightly focussed on happy memories, he began to explore the horcrux. There was nothing easily visible there, unlike in his soul, but after a few minutes he noticed something.

Looking in one direction, it appeared blacker, stiller. It was more like there was nothing there, rather than the swirling black magic and whispers that was Voldemort’s sixth horcrux. He walked towards it, but he was hesitant about getting too close.

He recalled how Snape had said willing something to appear would make it so, and no sooner had he concentrated on finding a way to another horcrux then a shimmering bridge appeared, woven together from strands of shimmering black magic. At least it felt like magic, only unlike his, it twisted in a way that made it seem grasping and malevolent.

He neared it hesitantly, and reached out a hand to the railing. It looked insubstantial, like he would fall right through it, but when he placed his hand on the railing, it was solid enough, only in a way he couldn’t really explain.

He snatched his hand back when a tendril worked itself free from the bridge and wrapped around his wrist.

He considered stepping out onto the bridge, but he didn’t like the way it had grasped at him like that. Instead he focussed on positive

feelings for a few more minutes before stumbling back into his own soul.

Back in the office, Snape handed him a vial. He had made the potion he had promised, and Harry drank the blue substance. He held his head for a few minutes as the potion began to work. It was definitely better than normal pain-relief potion.

"I am beginning to notice a difference," said Snape when Harry finally looked up, his eyes slightly glazed.

"You are?" Harry was surprised.

Snape nodded once. "It is small, but it is there."

"I can't see it. It looks exactly the same to me as it did the first time I saw it."

Snape didn't reply, though he looked like he wanted to say something more, and Harry was dismissed soon after.

Snape said he could see a difference, but was he just saying that to encourage Harry? He certainly couldn't see any difference. At this rate, it was going to take him several years to destroy the horcruxes – several long, painful years.

The only good thing that had come out of today's lesson as far as he could see was that he now knew how to get to the other horcruxes, or at least one other. Next time, he was going across the bridge. Even if Snape didn't want him to, he was going to see what was on the other side. Besides, if Snape didn't know, he couldn't get angry at Harry.

oOo

Harry was sitting at a table in the common room working on a new assignment for transfiguration. Hermione was doing something for Arithmancy and Ron, surprisingly, was reading. Harry looked at the cover and saw that it was the same book he had taken out of the library to read about wyverns.



“You know, I saw those dragons yesterday,” he said.

Ron’s head shot up. “You did? Where? I want to try and get a photo of them, so I can send it to Charlie. He’ll be able to identify them better than me.”

Harry stifled a smirk at Ron’s enthusiasm. “Flying over the turrets of the Astronomy Tower. You know, I think you might be right about it being a wyvern and not a dragon. I don’t think it did have arms.”

“Really! I’ll write Charlie and tell him. We should go out tomorrow after Quidditch practice and see if we can see them.”

Harry nodded, knowing he needed to practice. Gryffindor had their first match of the season in a few weeks and he’d hardly been on his broom since before Christmas.

The conversation lapsed again as they all went back to their work. Harry sighed, giving up on the transfiguration assignment. He pulled out his potions text instead and opened the book to the potion Snape had said they would be doing in the next lesson. As he propped it up on his knee, a folded scrap of parchment fell out and fluttered to the ground.

He leaned down and picked it up, assuming it was just a note or bookmark some past student had left in there.

Unfolding it, he glanced briefly at it and was about to toss it aside when he realised it was an address for a place in Wiltshire.

He looked closer at the parchment. It looked as if it had been folded and unfolded a dozen times, then scrunched up and thrown away before being dug out of the bin and folded again. It looked as if the writer had tried to disguise their handwriting a bit, but there was something distinct about the corners and loops of the letters that he recognised.

He slipped the parchment into a deep pocket, making sure it was tucked away securely. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, thinking. Was now the right time to pass it on? He hardly thought it

would have been given to him in the first place if it wasn't the right time.

Leaning back against the comfortable chair, with the dull chatter in the background, Harry accidentally fell asleep, though it turned out to be a good time to do so. He dreamed, and once again he was Voldemort, feeling his feelings and thinking his thoughts.

He was frustrated; he'd known it would be difficult to track down, but it was taking far longer than he had anticipated. Every avenue he'd gone down to find it had turned in to a dead end, and this last one seemed to be leading him nowhere. He looked down at the man he had just killed. Perhaps he shouldn't have been so quick to anger. The man might have known more than it had seemed.

With a disdainful glance around the ramshackle little cottage, he stepped back outside into the cold night air.

Harry woke with a start when a little first year girl over near the fireplace gave a loud shriek. He rubbed at his scar, which ached dully after the vision.

Hermione looked at him, concerned. "You're still having visions, aren't you?"

Harry smiled comfortingly. "Just now and then. Nothing to worry about." Hermione looked like she wanted to pursue the matter, so he jumped up. "Come on, let's go to dinner."

"Good idea," agreed Ron with enthusiasm. "I'm famished."

Harry ignored the dull throbbing in his scar and waited for Ron and Hermione to pack away their things, and then they all walked down to the Great Hall. Now would be a good time to pass the address on, with Voldemort not there. He just had to make sure the right people saw it. As it turned out, an opportunity presented itself less than an hour later.

Harry was nearly finished his dessert when he saw Kingsley stride into the doorway separating the Entrance Hall from the Great Hall.

At his appearance, several teachers at the Head Table, teachers he knew to be Order members, got up and went to greet him. The group left, walking up the staircase from the Entrance Hall.

Harry stood up quickly. "I have to go," he said, without giving an explanation. He rushed out of the hall, apparating as soon as he was out of sight in the empty hall. He estimated it would take about seven minutes for them to walk up to Dumbledore's office. That should give him plenty of time to place the note where they would see it.

He apparated to the tunnels and pulled his invisibility cloak on, before apparating again, straight into Dumbledore's office. Fawkes was asleep on a perch near the desk, but didn't wake as Harry rustled in his pocket for the slip of parchment.

He walked behind Dumbledore's desk and looked around for something to weight it down. He found a rock that was probably a paperweight. He cleared a space in the middle of the desk and flattened the piece of parchment out, placing the paperweight in the middle of it.

Satisfied that it couldn't be missed, he took a quick look around the office. His gaze caught on metal wire stand on the desk. Hanging from one of the hooks was a necklace.

It was the locket that Dumbledore had said Regulus Black had replaced the horcrux with. He reached out and took it off of its hook, opening the clasp that held it shut. A small piece of parchment, stained and old, fluttered out and he whipped out a hand to catch it.

It was a note, signed, as Dumbledore had said, by Regulus Black. Harry wondered if he'd destroyed the horcrux, or if he hadn't gotten the chance before Voldemort had killed him.

If he had, did Voldemort know? And if he hadn't, what had happened to it? Voldemort could have taken it back and hidden it, though Dumbledore had said that he was certain Voldemort didn't know that it had been taken by Regulus.

That meant it was probably hidden somewhere. Regulus Black had been the favourite son of his parents. He'd probably perfectly welcome in his home, unlike Sirius had been. What if the locket was hidden somewhere at Grimmauld Place?

He realised he'd been standing around in the middle of the office, and he wasn't sure how long.

Worried that the door was going to burst open at any moment, he folded the parchment up and put it neatly back inside the locket, hanging it back on its hook. He then apparated to the waterfall painting and stepped inside, shivering as the cold cascading water hit him.

He stepped sideways into the next painting and then jumped through into the grassy portrait in Dumbledore's office and found a comfortable seat on the grass. In the real world, it was sleeting outside, but in the painting he could feel warm sun splashing down on his shoulders.

As he walked waited for the Order members to reach the office, he hoped that Voldemort would stay out of the country a bit longer. If he was still looking, that was good, because anything he thought would help him couldn't be good. It was probably why there had been little Death Eater activity in the past week, too.

He wondered what the mysterious object was, and whether or not he should try to find out.

Suddenly something else occurred to Harry. In the dreams he'd had where Voldemort had been searching for whatever it was he was looking for, he had not had Nagini with him.

If Dumbledore was right about Nagini being a horcrux, it would be the opportune time to destroy her. Unless Voldemort had some special kind of magical protection around her, it might even be quite easy. He didn't think the Death Eaters were very fond of her; they probably did their best to keep out of her way.

A minute later the door opened and a dozen Order members filed into the room, taking up their usual positions around the room.

Dumbledore moved around to sit behind his desk and saw the paperweight and piece of parchment immediately.

He picked it up, frowning, then glanced around the rest of his desk as if to make sure everything else was where he'd left it. It wasn't, since Harry had pushed things to the sides, but he seemed satisfied that nothing was missing. Sprout noticed Dumbledore's frown. "What is it, Albus?"

"It is an address. I have never seen it before," said Dumbledore. "I do not know how it came to be on my desk." He frowned, and tapped the parchment with his wand several times, but whatever spell he had performed didn't help him, as he still appeared puzzled.

Snape walked around the desk and looked at the scrap of parchment over Dumbledore's shoulder. He reached around and snatched it out of Dumbledore's hand.

"This is the Malfoy's address," he muttered to himself, and then he said it again louder, to the rest of the room.

Chatter broke out among the gathered witches and wizards. "Do you think You-Know-Who is still using Malfoy Manor as a base?" asked McGonagall.

"We don't have evidence of him using anywhere else at the moment," replied Kingsley.

"Chances are he's still there," agreed Tonks. "This could give us a huge advantage if we take them by surprise. It's been a while since we captured any Death Eaters. If it's still their base, you can bet there'll be Death Eaters there."

"I'd like to know how this address mysteriously appeared here," put in Sprout. "It seems a bit fishy, if you ask me."

"It could be a trap," agreed Flitwick. "But can we really not do something with this information?"

"Whoever left this lying about would be in a great deal of trouble should the Dark Lord find out who it was. Once the secret was passed on, it is supposed to be burned, as we do, so that it cannot fall into the wrong hands." Snape frowned. "It does seem highly suspicious that someone would forget such a simple instruction, especially with the punishments the Dark Lord regularly dole's out to his followers."

"Whose writing is it?" asked Moody in his gruff voice.

"It is Lucius' or Draco's," replied Snape, frowning as he tried to decide whose. "The two of them and Narcissa are the Secret Keepers."

There was a brief silence. "Then let's take it to the Ministry," urged Sprout, turning to the Aurors in the room.

Kingsley nodded. "I would order immediate action, if that is what we agree is best," he answered, turning towards Dumbledore, who was stroking his long silver beard, listening to the suggestions flying around the room. He nodded slowly.

"What if someone from the Auror Department tips them off? I say we round up the rest of the Order and go. We've got the numbers," suggested Madam Hooch.

"He hasn't gotten to the Auror Department yet, not with Kingsley as Head Auror," stated Tonks surely.

"You can't know that, missy," barked Moody. "All it would take would be some underling in the department who's working for You-Know-Who to get wind of this and the secret would be out. That place'll be empty before we get anywhere near it."

There were some murmurs of agreement. Harry hoped they would go, though he supposed that even if it was the Ministry who acted on the tip-off, Voldemort would still be forced to find a new headquarters, which was what Malfoy wanted.

"If we go now, we risk walking into a trap. Perhaps we do a bit of digging, find out who left this here."

"If we wait, we risk the chance that he finds out we know the address, and then there shall be no one there," said someone. "No incriminating evidence, nothing."

"We already know they're guilty as hell," said Tonks, "and most people suspect it. The Ministry has been taken over by Death Eaters since Thorne got in. hey slither out of trouble like they always do."

Dumbledore turned to Snape, who was standing silently next to the desk, his arms crossed. "Severus, what do you think?"

Snape drummed the fingers of his right hand once on his sleeve, his black eyes assessing the others in the room. "I would prefer for it to be unofficial," he replied. "We go."

"You just want to protect the Malfoy's," growled Moody, taking an aggressive step forward.

Snape glared. "It will have an equal effect on upsetting the Dark Lord's plans whether we or the Ministry go," he said in a deadly voice. "If we go, we will also be the first to interrogate any Death Eaters we catch, the first to search the Manor for anything that might help us."

"We can get all the information we need from the Ministry Aurors."

"Ah, but as you already mentioned Alastor, we don't know that the Dark Lord has not gotten to the Auror Department. Who knows what may go on behind the Ministry's walls. But that hardly matters. Kingsley and Nymphadora are known members of the Order; Thorne will order them off the case at the first chance and we will hear nothing."

"Severus is right," spoke McGonagall. "I vote we go tonight, as soon as we can rally the others."

Heads around the room nodded in agreement.

Dumbledore clapped his hands. "Excellent. We shall meet back here in two hours. Kingsley, Tonks, you know what to do. Alastor, alert the Arthur and his sons. Filius, can you contact the Hogsmeade members?" Dumbledore gave out a few more instructions and one by one the people in the room hurried out the door or out the Floo. Harry briefly considered going with them somehow, to see if Nagini was at Malfoy Manor. However, he had no way to get there. He knew the address now, but he had never tried apparating somewhere he hadn't already been or seen before. He didn't even know if you could, since one of the steps of apparition was visualising the place you wanted to appear.

He would have to work out a better plan for Nagini. Besides, if she was at the Manor, Dumbledore would probably make her a priority. He had probably already thought of it himself.

Harry jumped through to a painting near the Entrance Hall and fell out when he was sure there was no one in the vicinity. He re-entered the Great hall only to find that most students had finished dinner. Now that he thought about it, he'd been in Dumbledore's office for a while.

He turned around and began the trek up to Gryffindor Tower.

It was already quiet in the corridors, and he only passed four or five students the whole way up.

He had just stepped off of a staircase and was nearing the portrait hole when he heard a hissed "Potter" and stopped, backtracking to the side corridor the voice had come from.

He squinted into the dark, waiting for his eyes to adjust.

Malfoy was loitering inconspicuously in the dark shadows.

Harry supposed he had seen the Aurors arrive and deduced that that was where Harry had gone.

"You owe me," said Harry, stepping into the shadows as well. "For the telescope," he added, in case anyone was listening.



A look of relief appeared on the Slytherin's face in realisation that Harry had passed on the address.

"What do you want," he asked grudgingly, his eyes narrowed as though he expected Harry to name some drastic price.

Harry was going to wave it off and say he didn't want anything when he thought of something.

"Ron wants to see you," he said.

A look of surprise, and then disgust appeared on the Slytherin's face. "What?"

"He's quite fond of the new you," replied Harry, grinning. "We have Quidditch practice tomorrow morning. Why don't you show up?"

"I suppose I could spare a few minutes of my time."

Harry gave an affirmative nod. "We finish our practice at 10, so be there a little after that."

Malfoy gave a long-suffering sigh, though there was a light in his eyes. He walked away without another word, though he did give a regal sort of roll of his hand that could be interpreted as a wave. Or perhaps it was just an 'if I must' gesture.

...

"Where did you go, Harry?" asked Hermione as soon as he sat down. "I thought you said you weren't in the Order."

Harry realised that like Malfoy, she must have seen Kingsley arrive, and worked out there was an Order meeting. "I'm not in the Order," he replied. "They really wouldn't let me. I just thought I would try to find out what was going on."

"It seems pretty major," said Ron, joining the conversation. "Kingsley looked in a hurry when he left, and Tonks seemed excited about something."

Hermione nodded slowly. "Let's hope it's something good for us."

Harry nodded in agreement. "It probably is if Tonks seemed excited."

There was a brief silence. Harry briefly contemplated telling them what was going on, but then he would have to explain about how he'd overheard it, and he didn't want to do that, so he kept quiet.

"I'll send an owl to Fred and George tomorrow," said Ron. "They'll know what's going on."

oOo

Harry handed Ron his broom and jogged over to a group of students sitting around on bean bags.

"Hey Harry."

"Hi Colin, mind if Ron borrows your camera for the morning?"

"Sure Harry!" replied Colin brightly, unhooking the camera from around his neck, though he did glance uncertainly at the redhead. Harry noticed the look. Ron wasn't known for being especially careful with breakable objects.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure it gets back to you in one piece." Suddenly he had an idea. "Hey, if you want, you could just come down to the pitch at about 10. That's when we finish Quidditch practice, and Ron and I were going to be dragon-spotting. He wants to get a few pictures to send to his brother Charlie," Harry explained.

Colin's eyes lit up.

"If you want, you can take the pictures for us. You'll probably be better at it than us."

Colin nodded enthusiastically. "I'll be there!"

"Great." Harry clapped him on the shoulder. "Thanks for this Colin."

Harry headed back to Ron and grabbed his broom when the redhead held it out. "Seeya Mione," said Ron. Hermione looked up from her work with a smile. "Have fun."

"Don't forget to come down later, okay?"

"I won't," replied Hermione, waving them away.

They headed out of the common room and down to the pitch.

Harry had a basic plan of the way he wanted the practice to go, but it was usually Ron who took charge of the details. He was a much better strategist than Harry when it came to Quidditch.

They played a two on four game first, with no snitch, so that they could work with the beaters. All the beaters had to do was aim at whoever had the quaffle. Harry just flew around observing as they played.

After that, they devoted time to the chasers, recruiting three of the best students who had tried out at the beginning of the year to play on the opposing team. Again the beaters aimed at whoever had the quaffle. Harry called out pointers as they played. He was pleased to note that everyone was playing exceptionally well, especially Ron.

Finally they played an all out game, adding more people who had tried out so that there were two full teams. He concentrated on his own flying, leaving the others to critique themselves as they played. He could always count on Ginny for that; she was very outspoken, and had no problem telling someone quite bluntly that they weren't doing something the right way.

He felt that he'd slipped a bit recently; flying so much as a dragon had taken away his desire to fly on a broom. It was slower and more cumbersome, but now that he was back in a game, he remembered the excitement that Quidditch held over animagus flying. It was more

about the competitiveness and catching the snitch, the team spirit and the laughter and cheers that rang around the stadium. He resolved to practice more. He didn't want to let his team down.

At ten, he congratulated everyone on their performance and most of them headed towards the change rooms. The spectators who had been in the stadium either milled around talking or started to wander back up to the castle.

Ron had told Ginny about trying to photo the dragons, and she had decided to join them. Harry looked around and saw Colin almost skipping across the pitch to join them, his camera bouncing around his neck.

"Cheers, Colin," said Ron, nodding at the camera when he arrived.

Colin waved it away. "I hope those dragons show up today. It would be amazing to get photos."

The others nodded in agreement as Hermione joined them. She'd heard Colin's comment. "Why do you even think they'll turn up today? They've really only been seen once. Or twice," she amended, "If you include the time Harry saw them."

Harry shrugged. "It's a nice day to be outside."

Hermione rolled her eyes at the ridiculous answer, but Ron nodded. "No, Mione, Harry's actually right. You're more likely to see dragons on a warm day than on a cold one. On cold days all they want to do is find the warmest place they can and stay there, but they get more active when it's hot."

Harry scanned the skies. Malfoy should be appearing any moment, if he'd remembered what Harry had asked him to do. There was every chance he'd slept in, or was still eating breakfast, or had simply decided he had better things to do than entertain Harry's friends. Harry thought he wouldn't be able to resist the chance to show off though, even if it was to Gryffindors.

Besides, it was the first relatively sunny day in ages, and quite a few students were making their ways out onto the still snow covered lawns.

They all turned to scan the sky, and a communal gasp went up from the group when the huge shape appeared over the turrets of Hogwarts.

“It’s coming right this way!” whispered Ginny with wide eyes.

“Excellent!” yelled Ron. “Colin, have your camera ready.”

He needn’t have bothered saying it though, as Colin was already snapping away as the dragon got closer and closer.

The few students that were still chatting in the stands had turned to watch, open-mouthed as the dragon approached. It reached the pitch and seemed to hang in the air for a moment, before plummeting downwards from a great height.

Right before he hit the ground, Malfoy twisted around and flew along the grass, then back up into the air.

The huge orange dragon twisted around the hoops at one end of the field, his pale scales flashing with a silver sheen as the sun hit them.

Harry grinned at the look of awe on Ron’s face. The irony that it was Draco Malfoy who put the expression there was not lost on Harry.

Colin’s camera was clicking away as they watched.

The dragon flew out of the pitch and over to near the lake. Apparently the crowds were bigger there.

His friends ran out after the dragon and Harry followed. They found a relatively dry patch of ground and sat down to watch.

It really was quite an impressive display. He could imagine himself up there with Malfoy, twisting and turning through the air as his friends oohed and aahed.

"It's quite a coincidence, isn't it," stated Hermione.

Harry tilted his head towards her slightly. "What is?"

"Oh, just that you all planned to come dragon spotting today, and one turns up."

Harry shrugged and smiled at her. "Just lucky I guess."

"Hm," said Hermione thoughtfully, going back to staring at the swooping dragon. "It's an odd dragon, isn't it? I mean, it hardly acts like one. It's almost as if it's showing off for us."

Harry gave another shrug. "The only other dragon I've ever seen was trying to eat me, so I really couldn't say."

Their conversation lapsed and they both returned to watching the dragon, Colin's camera still clicking away in the background.

oOo

I thought since it took me so long to get the last chapter out I'd make this one a relatively quick update. Hope you all enjoyed it!

A bit more Draco in the next chapter, because I think I've been neglecting him lately. That chapter should be up within a week.

Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter.

cyiusblack, bobbo, Lady Black-Malfoy, Slytherin66, ching965,  
ams71080, Jensindenial3516, Gondegoogoo,  
JustAnotherParallelDimension, nxkris, BadGirlgoesworse,  
oceanlover14, rasul, SlyPuff RavenDor, -Yuna's Reincarnation -1,  
Makurayami Ookami, tiny099, Pheonix Eternia, Sweet Heavens, pink-  
fogg,

Blah: Thanks for the suggestion. I think someone else has mentioned that, and I quite like the idea. Thanks for reviewing : )

marc: Glad you liked it, thanks for the review : )

QuannanHade: Glad you liked the duel. I don't really like the stories where you can have partial transformations either, maybe because it's been done too much. Haha, glad someone's keeping track of these things. I'll have to mention her in the next chapter. Thanks for reviewing : )

MalenkaMaus: Thanks for the great comments, much appreciated! Enjoy the rest of the story :P

. o O o . 55 . o O o .

“Get a look at the Prophet this morning, Potter?” asked Malfoy with a gloating smirk on his face as he reached up to get an ingredient off a high shelf.

“Who didn’t see it?” replied Harry, reaching up for a jar of the same ingredient. Of course Malfoy knew he’d seen it; everyone in the Great Hall had been talking about it.

One of Colin’s photos had made it to the Daily Prophet, and they’d had an expert in to identify the species of dragon. According to the Prophet’s expert, Malfoy was an English Firedancer, so named because they were native to England, and because they shared the resistance to fire that a Salamander did.

“Could have been you too,” said Malfoy lightly. “Although personally, I don’t think there’s room for both of us on the cover.”

Harry snorted. “You really like being the centre of attention, don’t you?”

“I’ve become accustomed to it,” replied Malfoy, smirking, then adding, “Let’s go down to the Chamber later.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll meet you after lunch?”

A shadow blocked the light and Harry looked at the doorway to see Snape standing with his arms crossed and looking suspiciously between the two of them. “Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Potter. Not arguing, I hope. Collect what you need and get back to your desks, now.”

He stood there watching darkly as they both pulled down a few more jars, and then stepped back to let them pass.

Malfoy stalked out, bumping his shoulder against Snape’s as he left, but Snape didn’t say anything to reprimand him. He looked after Malfoy with an odd look on his face and then turned back to glare at Harry.



Harry hurried back to his desk and deposited the jars of ingredients, twisting off the lids and digging out what he needed. He was bothered by the way Malfoy acted towards Snape, and he wondered if the Slytherin felt the way Harry had when he'd been angry at Snape.

He probably felt worse; Snape was Malfoy's godfather, after all. He knew Malfoy felt betrayed by Snape, and as far as he knew, they hadn't talked since Snape had been found out as a spy. For some reason, it greatly troubled Harry that they weren't on speaking terms.

He remembered times the previous year when he'd seen them together, and how he had felt jealous of the relationship that they had. Malfoy had seemed completely open with Snape, and talked to him with ease, and Snape had always been genuinely interested in what he had to say.

Maybe he should encourage Malfoy to talk to Snape again. He got the feeling Malfoy was extremely conflicted, and could do with a bit of persuasion one way or the other.

Distracted by his thoughts, he managed to spectacularly stuff up his potion, something he hadn't done in quite a while. He didn't even realise until Snape swooped down on him and looked into his cauldron, grimacing. "Not your best work of late, Potter. Appalling, in fact. Clean it up, and you'll be joining Mr. Finnegan for a make-up lesson."

Snape swept away and Harry scowled, but supposed he was lucky that Snape hadn't taken points as he once would have done. He looked over at Seamus' cauldron, which was a broiling mess of green muck.

At least Harry's was purple, as it was supposed to be.

He cleared his things away and sat silently, waiting for the class to end.

...

Harry finished his lunch and walked with Hermione and Ron back up to the common room. He was free for the rest of the day. They, however, had classes on, which worked well for Harry. It meant he didn't have to make up any excuse to go to the Chamber.

He walked with Ron to his lesson, and then made his way to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Malfoy was there as they had arranged, and they made their way down to the Chamber library.

"Not today, but maybe after astronomy this week, we should try out my resilience to fire," stated the Slytherin as they walked through the dank tunnels, stepping over all the bones that lay about the place.

Harry nodded. "How though? We can't light the Forbidden Forest on fire just so you can see if you don't get burned."

"Actually, there was a field fire near where I live two years ago that was started by a dragon."

Harry rolled his eyes. "We still can't purposely start a fire just for the sake of your own interest."

Malfoy gave a sigh. "I suppose not. Maybe you can just shoot Incendios at me."

"I could do that," agreed Harry, grinning.

They came into the Basilisk Chamber, and as usual, Malfoy stopped to admire the huge creature.

The huge jar of blood from when they had first drained it stood beside it still.

"You know, it's about time you sold some more scales or teeth or blood or something. On the last Hogsmeade weekend we had I enquired about buying basilisk scales from the apothecary we sold them to, and they aren't selling."

"Why? Have they sold them all off?"

Malfoy nodded. "I'd say so. There's no reason to keep broken ones, hoping that prices will increase, because they'd just lose their potency. Besides, it's a much desired ingredient. They probably sold out the same day we were there, and that was quite a while ago now. I know Sever-" Malfoy broke off looking annoyed. "Well, people have been looking for more, I'm sure."

Harry seized the opportunity to approach the topic. "Why don't you just talk to him?"

Malfoy knew exactly who Harry was talking about.

"You can't go on hating him forever, just because he has different views to you."

"I can and I will, Potter. Besides, that's not even the reason. He betrayed me. Not just me, my parents too. They've been friends since they were at Hogwarts!" Malfoy glared darkly, then added, almost as an afterthought, "And he betrayed the Dark Lord."

"So did you," replied Harry quietly, referring to the fact that Malfoy had given away his family's address to the Order.

Malfoy spun around, his lips pursed, and shook his finger at Harry. "No. No, I didn't. I was simply looking after my family's interests. That place is my home, and they were just turning it into – I don't know – a... a-" Malfoy broke off, shaking his head. "It just wasn't right."

"I suppose I can understand that," said Harry. "Hogwarts is my home. If Voldemort attacked here, I'd be angry. I'd want him gone."

Malfoy nodded in agreement. "But it doesn't mean I betrayed him. It doesn't."

Harry didn't want to argue, even though he disagreed.

"Have you heard anything about it yet?"

Harry shook his head. "You haven't?"

“No, though I suppose it has only been a few days.”

“I know they went there that night; at least, they said they were going to.”

They stood in silence for a few minutes, both deep in thought. After a while, Harry suggested they go into the Library, and they left the basilisk behind.

“What do you want to do?” asked Harry as they descended the staircase.

Malfoy looked around the library thoughtfully and his eyes settled on one of the archways that led away from the library chamber.

“I haven’t been down those tunnels yet. Have you?”

Harry nodded. “I didn’t go far. There’s an office in there, but I haven’t had much of a look around it.”

“Slytherin’s private study! I bet there’s heaps of interesting things in there.” Malfoy took the last few steps quickly and headed towards the doorway.

Harry had only been in the study once or twice before, and he had never really looked around it in detail. It was dimly lit with a few wall sconces, which burst into light when they entered the room.

Malfoy immediately walked around and took a seat at the desk, for some reason looking highly pleased with himself. He smirked at Harry, settling himself comfortably into the chair.

He leaned back in the plush chair for a second, before his eyes fell on the draws of the desk, and he leaned forward to open the top one.

“They’re locked,” said Harry, remembering the time he had tried them.

Malfoy tisked, but then exclaimed, “Aha!”

Harry moved around to that side of the desk to see that Malfoy had managed to open a drawer. "How did you do that?"

"See the indentation?" replied the Slytherin, indicating with his finger down the length of the drawer.

Harry looked closer. It was difficult to see, since it was shallow and the same colour as the rest of the wood, but there was an indent, running down the middle of the otherwise flat wood.

"It's the same sort of thing as is on the door that leads from the courtyard."

Harry reached into the drawer and pulled out an old quill. It had a huge feather on the end of it, and dried ink on the nib.

Malfoy pulled a small leather-bound book out, flipping it open to a random page.

"It's a diary of some sort," he said, placing it flat on the desk and bending over it with interest. "Imagine the sort of things he probably wrote in here." He turned a few pages into it and read several lines. "Here, look at this. He's written about building Hogwarts."

Harry leaned over and read a few lines. It was a bit hard to understand the old English, but it seemed to be a paragraph about laying the foundations of the castle.

Suddenly Malfoy gave a hiss and his body stiffened as he flinched slightly. He stood up quickly, avoiding looking at Harry. "I have to go," he said shortly, and walked briskly away before Harry could answer.

After a few seconds, Harry got up and went back to the library. Malfoy had gone into the tunnels that led to the house common rooms. Harry thought he must be going back to his room to change before he left the castle.

Harry waited for a minute before going the same way. Instead of taking the door to the Slytherin Common Room though, he took the one to the waterfall painting and stepped into it.

Malfoy probably hadn't reached his room yet, though he'd be there very soon.

Harry jumped through into a painting near the potions classroom that he'd been in before. Serenius Mobrey was nowhere to be seen, but whatever potion he was making was bubbling away in the cauldron. Harry walked over and took a look in the cauldron. It wasn't a potion that he recognised. He gave a sniff; it smelled distinctly of honeydew and flax.

Remembering this wasn't why he was here, he jumped through to painting after painting until he came to one in the Entrance Hall.

He waited impatiently, though not for long. Mere minutes later, a black clad figure walked briskly past his painting. He watched them go and was turning to go himself when it hit him that the figure hadn't come from the dungeons, as Malfoy would have done.

Frowning, he turned back to watch the hall, and two more black clad figures passed before Malfoy appeared. He was wearing the black robes of a Death Eater, but he didn't have the mask on yet. He too disappeared quickly out the main doors of the castle. He wondered if those he had just seen were the only Death Eaters in the castle, or just the only ones called. It could be that they were new recruits, and had recently been shown the Malfoy's address, so they were suspected of having passed it on, or at the very least, not destroyed it.

He waited a few more minutes, but nobody else appeared, so he fell forward out of the painting and then apparated to the portrait hole of the Gryffindor Common Room.

It was late and no one was up when he went in, so he headed up to his dormitory and changed into his pyjamas.

He laid in bed, keeping one eye on the map and worrying himself with horrifying images of what could be happening to Malfoy at that very moment.

Perhaps it was a routine call, but Malfoy had seemed nervous and Harry had the feeling that it was about their address finding its way to the Order.

If Voldemort found out that Malfoy had purposely passed on the address, there was no doubt in Harry's mind that he would kill him for the betrayal.

It was early in the morning, and he'd fallen asleep twice, when he finally saw a dot labelled Draco Malfoy appear at the edge of the map and make its way up to the castle. He saw no other dots, so either the others hadn't returned yet, or had come back while he'd been asleep.

He gave a sigh of relief that Malfoy hadn't been found out and rolled up the Map, slipping it into the drawer beside his bed.

Rolling over, he fell asleep again.

oOo

Malfoy was absent at breakfast the next morning, but was there at dinner and he looked terrible, and Harry knew he must have had a rough night. He felt a twinge of sympathy for the Slytherin, but as always, he reminded himself that the Slytherin had made his own choices.

oOo

Harry was in the horcrux once again, but this time he had a different purpose. He groped blindly through the dark, noticing as he moved that the whispers were there again, and this time they weren't so fleeting. It was continuous, almost like someone was whispering a chant. Another difference was a frigid wind. It blew softly, but there was something menacing in the way it brushed against his skin.

Quite soon, the twisting grasping weave of magic that was a bridge appeared.

It glowed dully, with a silver sort of light that barely penetrated the darkness around it.

The bridge stretched out endlessly into the darkness.

He tentatively placed his hand on it, and forced himself to leave it there, letting a tendril of magic break away and curl around his hand. It was cold, and it stung where it touched his hand.

He ripped his hand away. It hurt a bit, as if there were thousands of little hooks in it, but it wasn't too difficult.

Taking a deep breath, he took a step.

As soon as both feet were on the bridge, the whispers and the wind stopped abruptly. At the same time, the pain in his scar diminished. It was almost as if he were no longer in the horcrux, no longer in any part of Voldemort's soul.

The bridge was the magic that held the soul together, or maybe the magic that had cast the horcrux into Harry.

He could only assume that the bridge would lead to the soul still in Voldemort's body.

He swallowed again, trying not to let his nervousness get the better of him. He used his skill in Occlumency to push the feelings down, and took another step.

He looked behind him as he walked, and saw the swirling black of the horcrux getting smaller and smaller.

Each step he took seemed to take him further away from the horcrux than was normal. It was like one step was ten metres.

The darkness around him was disconcerting as he walked. he felt like he was five again, and that there were monsters staring at him, waiting for him to look away so they could reach out and grab at him.

More than once he flinched around, seeing imaginary shapes and shadows out of the corner of his eye.



After several minutes of walking he began to notice a silver glimmer up ahead, and soon he was stepping off of the bridge onto another horcrux, or perhaps the bit of soul that resided in Voldemort's body. He thought the latter was more logical and likely.

There was nothing around him, save for the cold wind and whispers he had felt in the horcrux. The wind was harder here, though, and the whispers were louder and more menacing.

He had no idea how he was going to find the specific horcrux he wanted, until he remembered that he could visualise things, and they would appear to him, like in the mind.

Harry closed his eyes and concentrated. He didn't visualise anything specific, rather, he simply imagined that there was an easier way to find the path to each horcrux.

He opened his eyes after a few moments to find that a door had appeared a few metres in front of him, and he started towards it.

It was a simple design, and was made of some grey-blue stone. He turned the handle, and stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

He found himself then in a room he had seen before, in his fifth year. It was the room from the Ministry of Magic, specifically, the one in the Department of Mysteries.

As soon as he closed the door behind him, the walls around him spun.

He chose a door at random and opened it. He stepped forward automatically, but found himself scrabbling at the stone doorway when nothing but a black void of nothingness appeared on the other side of the door.

He stepped back, breathing fast and hoping the burst of emotion hadn't registered in Voldemort's mind. Closing his eyes, he took a minute to completely clear his mind, pushing all emotion deep beneath his barriers.

He opened his eyes again and looked out the door. Looking closer, he saw that it wasn't a complete void at all; there were swirls of black magic, and when he stuck his hand out, he could feel the same biting wind he'd felt in the horcrux that was in him.

However, he could see no way of reaching the horcrux. He tried to visualise a bridge, but nothing appeared. He frowned and considered what this meant. Perhaps this was one of the horcruxes that had been destroyed already? This bit of soul was still tethered to the rest, but there was no way to reach it because it wasn't physically bound to anything.

He closed the door; there was nothing more he could do there. As soon as the door latched shut, the walls began to spin around him, making it impossible to know which ones he had opened and which ones he hadn't.

They slowed and stopped. "Show me the locket," he said, and as he had hoped a door clicked open, to his left. He walked over to it and opened it slowly. Unlike the last door, there was something there. It was another bridge, the weave of black magic stretching into darkness again. He could see no difference between this bridge and the first one, and he could only assume that it was actually a different one.

He supposed that since there was a bridge here, the horcrux still existed.

He was going to step out on to the bridge and see what was on the other side, but he had been gone for a longer than usual, and his head was only getting worse. Besides, he had done what he had wanted to do.

He was happy with the progress he had made, so he closed the door and stepped into the middle of the room. He waited for the doors to stop spinning before he spoke again.

"Show me my soul," he said, and then he stepped forward to the door that opened. He stepped back onto the bridge and made his way as

quickly as he could along it, arriving at a horcrux a short time later. He hoped it was the horcrux that was anchored to his own soul.

The pain returned full blast when he stepped off of the bridge, and very shortly he was nearly crawling, unable to hold himself up.

It seemed like a long time later when he staggered out of the blackness and into his own soul again. His stomach lurched unpleasantly as his perception shifted back to the office

He took the blue pain-relief potion Snape handed him, but didn't drink it. He felt like he was going to throw up if he did.

Snape seemed to realise, because he got up and went to a cabinet, returning with a vial of khaki coloured liquid. "A stomach settling potion. Try to drink it in one mouthful."

Harry took it gratefully, and though he gagged slightly at the taste, it made him feel better almost instantly. He followed it with the pain relief potion and after a few minutes of sitting quietly, he was able to think again.

"You were gone a long time this evening," said Snape when Harry sat up straighter in his chair.

"Sorry," muttered Harry sarcastically. "It must have been terribly boring for you waiting around for all that time."

Snape raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything about Harry's tone of voice. "As a matter of fact, I spent the evening being chatted up by Hagrid and a young Mr. Weasley."

Harry cracked open an eye, confused. "What?"

"It would seem you were not satisfied to harass me with an eleven year old version of yourself; this time you brought along friends."

"Why would they be there?"

“If we accept the theory that your soul is who you are, then perhaps it contains images or memories of some sort of the people, places, and things that have made you who you are.”

Harry nodded. That sounded reasonable to him, and he didn't really feel up to thinking about it in any detail.

“I haven't seen anything in the horcrux yet,” he muttered. “There's the whispers I told you about, and the wind, but that's all.”

“I imagine his soul is far less open than yours. It may be that the longer you stay in there, the more aware he will become that you are there, and you will start to see more.”

“Mm.”

“How do you feel after these sessions?” asked Snape, leaning forward and staring at Harry intently, a slight frown on his face.

Harry shrugged. “My head hurts. Why?”

“The first time I visited your soul, your hand was covered in a black substance that you claimed was from going too close to the horcrux. Since you have been consciously travelling into this soul, the blackness has grown further up your arm. I simply wondered if you had noticed a change within yourself, or if it is irrelevant.”

Harry thought about how short of a temper he'd had lately, and how he'd been feeling impatient snapping at people far more than was usual. Was exposing his mind to Voldemort's soul changing him on some deep level, or was his altered behaviour was just due to stress and lack of sleep?

He shook his head slowly. “No, I don't feel different.”

oOo

That weekend, Harry had Quidditch practice. It was their last before their game against Hufflepuff and he was pleased to see that the

team was in top form. Ron had devised some new strategies that looked as if they would work quite well for them.

...

He was in a good mood when he went off to Astronomy that night, given that he hadn't had a Fidelimency lesson that evening. He stopped at a large storage room near the stairs that led up to the top of the tower and pulled out one of the dust old telescopes that belonged to the school. He'd used one once before, and he could remember the scratch that had gone right through the middle of the lens, and the discolouration of the glass.

He still hadn't received his new lenses; they should be arriving in the next few days.

He lugged the heavy telescope up the stairs and set it down next to where Malfoy was already set up.

"I set up your telescope already," stated the Slytherin, not glancing up from where his eye was glued to the eyepiece of his own telescope.

Harry stopped and looked on the other side of the Slytherin. "That's not a school telescope," he replied. It was a new model, its sleek black tube shining darkly where the light hit it.

"I know."

"Where's it from then?"

Malfoy shrugged. "I don't know. I owl ordered it from a catalogue. I could find out if you want."

Harry stared at it, disbelieving. "Hang on. When you say my telescope, do you mean you're just letting me use your new one, or you bought me a new one?"

"It isn't as if my family can't afford it. I broke your telescope; I bought you a new one."

"You didn't have to do that," mumbled Harry. "I just ordered new lenses. It wasn't a big deal." he couldn't believe Malfoy had replaced his broken lenses with a completely new telescope.

Malfoy finally looked up, his eyebrow raised and a slight smirk on his face. "You could have fooled me. It was quite a tantrum you threw the other night."

"I didn't throw a tantrum," hissed Harry, leaning the bulky school telescope against the wall and walking around Malfoy to inspect the new one. "I was just in a bad mood, and you breaking expensive belongings of mine didn't really help."

Malfoy snorted. "Expensive, oh yes, I'm sure. I'll bet that telescope didn't cost you any more than ten galleons. You should have bought a new one yourself anyway, since you decided to study NEWT level astronomy."

Harry didn't bother to reply; he was too busy admiring his new telescope. It was sleek and shiny, and the view through it was amazingly clear. It seemed to have some sort of automatic focussing charm on it, though there were still knobs if he wanted to do it manually.

"This was really nice of you," began Harry, but Malfoy waved him off.

"Let's just say we're even now."

....

Ten minutes after astronomy ended, Harry closed the entrance to the chamber behind them, and he and Malfoy descended the steps into the tunnel that would take them to the chamber.

"This place really could do with a bit of decoration," mused Malfoy as they walked through the damp tunnel. He kicked at a rat skull that was in his way, and it smashed against the tunnel wall, the brittle bone cracking into several pieces.

“Why? It’s not like we sit in here all day; we’re only walking through it.”

“Yes, but I’m sure Salazar Slytherin didn’t concern himself with walking through foetid tunnels filled with bones and mould. It smells atrocious down here, too.”

Malfoy picked that exact moment to step in a slippery patch, and fall rather un-elegantly to the ground.

He jumped up immediately as Harry tried to quell his grin. Malfoy sneered nastily at him before looking down and twisting around to inspect himself.

He looked absolutely appalled to find smears of grime on his once pristine robes. “Oh, disgusting!”

“It’s just a bit of dirt,” said Harry bracingly. “Look.” He pulled out his wand and pointed it at one of the slime patches. “Tergeo,” he incanted, and most of the slime disappeared, leaving a dark wet patch behind.

“It’s no good – completely ruined.” Malfoy pursed his lips and unbuttoned the front of his robe, gingerly slipping it off his shoulders so that he didn’t get any on the clothes he was wearing underneath. He tossed the robe on the floor with a look of disgust, and then pulled out his wand and cast an Incendio at it.

Harry watched the material burn. “You could have just washed it you know.”

Malfoy waved his hand and kept walking. “I have others.”

“Your family has more money than is good for you,” muttered Harry, walking after the other boy. Suddenly he came to a decision. “You know, we don’t have to walk all the way.”

“What do you mean?” called Malfoy over his shoulder.

“Did I tell you I got the Pendant back?”

Malfoy stopped and spun around with an excited expression. "Where is it?"

Harry drew it out of his robes, and Malfoy picked his way back over to look at it more closely. "Very nice..." he breathed. "Show me how it works."

Harry concentrated on the spot right behind Malfoy and apparated there. "Like that," he said, grinning, and Malfoy spun around, surprised. A grin split his face. "Can I try it?"

Harry nodded and put the chain around both their necks. It magically lengthened so that it looped easily around both of them.

"Where do you want to go?" asked Harry.

He didn't even blink, but all of a sudden they were no longer in the chamber, standing instead in the middle of the kitchens.

It was the first time that Harry had been in the kitchens and not had swarms of house elves descend upon him. He supposed this late at night they were all asleep, or maybe cleaning the common rooms while they were empty of students.

"Well, that's how it works," said Harry. "I take it you did have the kitchens in mind?"

As if on cue, Malfoy's stomach gave a loud rumble.

"Hungry, are you?"

A red tinge appeared across Malfoy's face, making Harry chuckle.

"Shut up, Potter."

Harry laughed. "Don't tell me; Malfoys' stomachs don't rumble," Harry joked, earning a sneer from the Slytherin.



Harry tugged the chain back over Malfoy's head so he could move away. "I could eat too, actually." He walked over to a cupboard and opening it, he found stacks upon stacks of plates. He tried another, and found hundreds of goblets.

"Where d'you reckon all the food is?" he asked. "I don't fancy searching through every cupboard in here."

Malfoy shook his head in apparent despair. "You really are a complete muggle, do you know that, Potter?"

Malfoy pulled out his wand and held it in the air. "Accio bread, accio butter!"

"And milk and jam," suggested Harry, so Malfoy summoned some of them too.

Half an hour later, Harry was very full, and very sleepy. He gave a yawn. "I think I might turn in."

Malfoy nodded in agreement, draining the last of his drink. "Can I use it sometimes?" he asked, nodding at the Pendant around Harry's neck as they both stood and collected their bags and telescopes.

Harry snorted. "No. I don't trust you that much, Malfoy."

Malfoy looked affronted, but then nodded seriously. "Good." He gave a smirk. "Apparate me back to my room then," he said, tossing his head. "If you don't have to walk, I shouldn't have to either."

oOo

Good? Bad? Somewhere in the middle? Let me know : )

Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter: Sweet Heavens, oceanlover14, Gondegoogoo, SHuntress, Slytherin66, BadGirlgoesworse, purpleflyingmonkeys, Redheads r smexy, ams71080, pink-fogg, JustAnotherParallelDimension, nxkris, fhippogriff, ching965, Pheonix Eternia, ShadowBreaking,

Jensindenial3516, Lady Black-Malfoy, -Yuna's Reincarnation -1, christoh13, black-heart-green-eyes, saifai and

marc: glad you liked it : ) thanks for reviewing!

QuannanHade: Yep, she's definitely suspicious. Haven't decided if she'll be the one to figure it out or not though. As for Colin's camera, it didn't have unlimited film. Although he was taking a lot of pictures. I didn't really think about that haha. I always imagine wizarding pictures were developed with a special potion or something. Thanks for reviewing : )

Dreamweaver: I agree. I have to decide what's going to happen there still haha. Thanks for the review : )

## Not a Good Few Days, Everything Considered

### Muggleborn Registration Commission Launched.

The Ministry of Magic is currently undertaking a survey of all muggleborns who reside in England. A commission has been formed, headed by upstanding members of the Ministry, to catalogue the details of muggleborns.

The register will also provide a list which shall allow the Ministry to better protect the members of our society who are being targeted by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Name.

A representative from the Commission has stated that once a full list has been collated, muggleborns will receive newsletters and updates to keep them apprised of changes which may affect them, as well as informational defence pamphlets.

A spokesperson from the highly commended Department of Mysteries has also commented that the Register will assist in researchers understand how muggleborns came to possess their magical powers. "They obviously didn't inherit it, so their magic has come from some other source. An in depth study using data from all known muggleborns will provide significant data to help us learn more about the situation."

Dolores Umbridge, long term Ministry employee, has been appointed as head of the Muggleborn Registration Commission.

Any muggleborns choosing not to register will be subject to fines and punishment under the new laws passed yesterday.

"People won't let this happen," said Ron, clearly indignant, his arm hanging supportively around Hermione's shoulders. "To protect muggleborns – no one will believe that's what this is about."

"What are they going to do about it though?" asked Harry. "It has too much Ministry support. The Order should never have let Thorne be

voted in. He's just taking over more and more of the ministry. And if you ask me, Thorne seems pretty popular. People might believe this is for their own good."

"It's just ridiculous!" exclaimed Hermione. "And putting that horrible Umbridge woman in charge, too!"

Harry scowled at the memory of Umbridge, seeing her smirking face in his mind. He pushed the image aside. "Don't worry Hermione. We aren't going to let anything happen."

"Yeah," agreed Ron. "Not to you, and not to anyone other muggleborns, either."

oOo

Once again, Harry had crossed the bridge into the soul that still occupied Voldemort's own body. He stepped off of the bridge, keeping his mind as clear as he could. Immediately, the winds and whispering started up, louder than he'd heard so far. He wished that he could see something, anything, but all around him was only darkness.

He took a few more blind steps and then stopped. Harry felt a cold dread rise as a figure appeared in front of him, but he squashed the feelings down below his shields almost subconsciously.

Suddenly, something that Harry had been hoping wouldn't happen anytime soon, did. A figure approached, holding an oil lamp that lit a small circle around the figure. When the figure got close enough, Harry recognised him, though it had been obvious who it was anyway.

Voldemort's representation was as frightening as the living counterpart.

He had a terrifyingly cold demeanour that radiated off of him in waves, and his intense red eyes bored holes in Harry.

His face was more human though, far less snake-like. His skin was still unnaturally pale, but his features, except for the eyes, were all distinctly human.

The tall, thin frame seemed the same, and he stared imposingly down at Harry.

“Who are you?” asked Voldemort, his voice a cold and deadly whisper. “How did you come to be in this place?”

This question worried Harry. If Voldemort’s soul was recognising him as some foreign presence, there was every chance that his mind would start to notice it too. Harry hadn’t managed to perform Fidelimency on himself without Snape leading him yet, but Voldemort was a far more skilled Legilimens than Harry was. He couldn’t risk that Voldemort would figure out what was going on and find out what Harry was up to.

He gritted his teeth against the pain that was pulsing in his head. He couldn’t do anything radical, anything that would make him stand out too much against the rest of Voldemort’s soul.

He imagined himself as something insignificant, something drifting unseen. He looked down, and found his body had disappeared, like he was a pair of eyes floating in this black place.

He moved away somehow, despite the fact that he had no legs to speak of. Worryingly, Voldemort’s soul seemed to know exactly where he was, because the representation followed him, the red eyes searching the darkness around Harry, but never locking directly on him.

After ten minutes, Harry realised he couldn’t just float around, waiting for this representation to go away. He didn’t think that was going to happen, anyway, and the splitting pain in his head was only getting worse. He decided he would just have to get on with it.

He imagined himself in the room with all the doors, and immediately appeared there. he just hoped the representation couldn’t get in.

“Show me the diary,” he murmured, and a door clicked open. He didn’t bother looking inside, just used his wand to engrave the word diary into the stone. He closed the door again and when they stopped spinning, he noted that the word was still there. Good.

One by one, he marked the doors of the horcruxes he knew; the diary, Nagini, himself, the locket, the ring.

That left two unknowns, plus the soul in Voldemort that would most likely have to be destroyed by Fidelimancy. It was better than seven, he supposed.

“Show me an unknown horcrux,” he said, and one of the unmarked doors clicked open. He opened it further, revealing yet another bridge. “Show me what you are,” he said, not knowing if it would work. It didn’t. “Wishful thinking,” he muttered.

He was going to go into the horcrux, when his vision started to waver. His whole body was trembling with the pain, and he realised he felt sick. Deciding he’d done enough for today, he left back to his own soul, staggering into the light.

Half an hour later, he left Snape’s office, pulling on his invisibility cloak. He felt sick still, but he had something to do, and there was no point putting it off because he didn’t feel well.

Harry was skipping dinner. He walked through the corridors, peering at the Map to make sure he didn’t run into anyone. Suddenly he spotted a person that wasn’t usually in the castle: Narcissa Malfoy. Grasping the Pendant, he apparated to the waterfall painting. It has been where he was headed anyway, but now he decided to take a short detour. Before he stepped in he pulled his invisibility cloak on.

Less than a minute later he was standing, silent and invisible, in Abraxas Malfoy’s portrait in Malfoy’s room, just in time to hear the knock on the door.

Malfoy was sitting at his desk and when he heard the knock, he stood, straightened his robes, and walked over to the door, opening it to reveal Narcissa.

"Hello, my darling," she cooed, stepping inside and pulling Draco into an embrace.

Draco stepped back, smiling. "Mother, you look well."

She smiled. "Thank you darling. I feel well. I came to see that you were alright. Your father told me about the Dark Lord's suspicions." Narcissa looked worriedly at her son.

"I'm fine, mother. He knows it wasn't me. Come and sit down," he said, gesturing to the arm chair in the middle of the room. She did so, and Draco leaned back against his desk.

"How are things at the Manor?" he asked.

Narcissa gave a small smile and waved her hand. "Oh, quite lovely, once those dreadful Order members left. It's rather quiet now though. I do miss the company."

Harry suspected she didn't quite mean that last bit, judging by her tone and the small smile about her lips.

Draco gave a satisfied smile at his mother's obvious happiness at the turn of events.

"Where is Gaspard?" asked Narcissa, glancing about the room.

As soon as she spoke the ferret's name, a bump in the middle of Malfoy's bed shot up, making a tent out of the sheets.

Narcissa saw it too and let out a soft laugh. Following the sound, the bump under the sheets raced around, looking for a way to get out.

It found one at the side of the bed and Gaspard appeared, scampering across the carpet and leaping onto Narcissa's lap.

“He’s a playful little fellow, isn’t he?” stated Narcissa, as Gaspard rolled onto his back and wiggled around, apparently waiting for his belly to be scratched.

“Yes, Mother.” Malfoy grimaced slightly, though not so his mother could see. “Adorable.”

After a few more minutes of conversation Narcissa gave a sigh and stood. “I shall be off then, darling.” Narcissa embraced her son once more, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

Watching Malfoy with his mother gave Harry an extraordinary feeling of jealousy. He turned away abruptly and jumped through to Phineas Nigellus’ Painting in Dumbledore’s office. To his surprise, Phineas was there. It had been a while since Harry had actually seen him in the painting, and he hadn’t been expecting it.

He collided solidly with the once headmaster, almost knocking him over. Phineas gave a yell and withdrew his wand, his eyes scanning the air around him for the invisible force that had nearly knocked him over.

Harry stood as still as he could. He was unreasonably annoyed by the fact that Phineas was holding him up, and he was feeling greatly impatient.

“Who’s there?” called Phineas. “Headmaster, someone has just entered my domain, but I cannot see them!”

Harry looked out through the canvas to see Dumbledore peering up at the painting, a frown on his face.

Deciding he didn’t want to wait any longer, Harry slowly withdrew his own wand beneath his cloak. Keeping it close to his body, he poked it through the folds of the cloak and performed a wandless stunning charm.

The beam of red light hit Phineas squarely in the chest, and he fell backwards, hitting the ground and laying unmoving.



Suddenly a witch, another former head of Hogwarts, burst in from behind Harry, and another behind her.

Before Harry could raise his wand, the witch had fired off her own stunner, and Harry felt his stomach sink as it hit him. He'd been stunned before, and he waited for unconsciousness to claim him, but two seconds later, the realisation hit him that the spell had had no effect.

Not wanting to hang around and see if the next one did, he took off running towards the door at the back. He opened it and slipped through, slamming it behind him.

He headed for the other door with a sign saying 'Twelve Grimmauld Place' and opened it. He could hear running footsteps from the other side of the other door, but they disappeared when he shut the door to Grimmauld place behind him and left Hogwarts completely. He knew the only one who could follow was Phineas himself; the door would not appear to the others.

He huffed in frustration that he hadn't been more careful. It wouldn't do at all for Dumbledore to find out Harry was able to get into the paintings and spy on his office. He banged his fist against the wall in anger. He knew he wouldn't normally be this quick to anger, that it was probably because he had just had a Fidelimency session with Snape. Harry knew he should occlude, but for some reason he wanted to be angry. He was trying to help, and people were just getting in his way. He had a right to be angry.

He kicked at the canvas, hearing it rip as he stepped through into the next painting. He found a way up to the third floor of the house and then tumbled out of a painting, making sure he was kept covered by his invisibility cloak. Up another set of stairs, and he was in the attic.

He went quietly up them. At one point he thought he heard a thump somewhere in the house and he froze, expecting someone to appear, but the house was silent and still again. He continued up, finally reaching the attic.

He closed the attic door quietly behind him. There was a window and a light pole was shining in through the window. It wasn't particularly bright though, so he cast a wandless lumos and directed it to hover over a stack of boxes.

There were lots of them and with a sigh, he lugged one down and opened it, revealing all manner of treasures and trinkets.

Harry rubbed his eyes tiredly and glanced at his watch. He'd been searching through boxes for over two hours now, and his head was throbbing sharply, despite the pain-relief potion Snape had given him.

Deciding to give it up for the time being, Harry used his wand to burn small, inconspicuous X's into the boxes he'd looked in, stacking them back neatly against the wall.

He'd actually gotten through a fair few, though he'd found nothing that was really of interest.

He went back down the stairs, and was stepping onto the landing of the third floor when a door at the shadowy end of the hallway caught his attention. It was directly opposite Sirius' room, and the name on the door read Regulus.

They hadn't touched that room when Harry had been here, though of course they could have since then, but there were more than enough bedrooms on the lower levels of the house.

Deciding it was worth a quick look, Harry tried the handle and found it locked. He tried an Alohamora on it, but it remained locked.

He tried the Parseltongue locking spell he knew, and it was stronger than whatever locking charm had been placed on it, and after casting it the handle turned easily.

The room was dark, and his eyes were only just starting to adjust to the dim light when he saw an even darker figure hurtling towards him.

Out of reflex, Harry threw up an arm to shield himself, catching someone hard across the face with the heel of his hand.

There was a loud thump as whoever it was fell backwards, and he took the opportunity to pull out his wand and level it at them. "Lights," he said, and wall sconces lit the room. On the floor in front of him was none other than Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Don't move!" he ordered, as she regained her surroundings and started to get to her feet. She stood up slowly, but hung back, a look of rage on her face.

Her eyes flickered from Harry, to his wand, to the door and back again. She wiped a hand gingerly across her nose, flicking her hand once to get rid of the blood that came away on it. Her nose was bleeding quite freely, a stream trickling over her lips and chin, and dripping as she swayed slightly on her feet.

She looked slightly feral; her hair was a mess and her eyes were bloodshot.

"Itty bitty little Potter," she said so quietly that Harry nearly didn't hear.

"What are you doing here?" spat Harry. Was she here of her own accord, having somehow gained access to Grimmauld Place, or was she being kept here by the Order? It was only about a week since they'd gone to Malfoy Manor; perhaps she had been captured there.

Bellatrix gave a feral grin then. "Doesn't he know, then? Being adventurous, walked into the wrong room by accident, naughty boy?"

She lunged at him then, and he dodged out of her way, realising he'd left a clear path to the door.

Perhaps it had been her plan, because she didn't falter or change direction, moving straight towards it.

With a flick of his wand, the door slammed shut in front of her outreached, clutching fingers.

His hissed spell stopped her in her tracks, and she didn't bother trying to turn the handle.

There was an obvious look of trepidation in her face as she turned to face him again, though she tried to hide it behind a malicious sneer.

“What are your intentions, little boy?” she growled, her eyes shifting around, looking for anything to help her, but there was nothing.

Harry shrugged, staring hatefully at her. “I guess you were right before. I walked in here by accident.”

She let out a cackle and clapped her hands together, once. “And no one here to protect the wee one!” she commented, her voice gleeful.

Harry scoffed. “I don’t think I’m the one that needs protecting here.”

Her eyes glinted dangerously. “I’ll get you, itty bitty Potter, like I got your dear godfather, my dear cousin. Poor little Sirius!”

Harry’s eyes hardened. “You’ll get me? You and what army? You don’t even have a wand.” He twitched the one he held.

“Fevicus!” shouted Bellatrix, her hand making a wild motion in the air. A purple jet of light shot from her fingertips.

Harry barely got a shield up, taken off-guard by the display of wandless magic. She seemed to have a bit of an aptitude for it. Most wizards could do anything, let alone such a complex spell, with such precision.

Bellatrix leapt forward, muttering some spell hadn’t heard. A basic shield charm stopped it and a mild bludgeoning spell sent her tumbling backwards, hitting the wall with a thump.

He knew he was toying with her. Given the skill he knew she possessed, had she a wand, it would have been a real duel, but he was doing nothing more than mocking her with his own half-hearted spells, and she knew it.

They were circling each other, Bellatrix crouched and growling, Harry almost dancing as he moved lightly around the room, confident that he had the power.

She growled in frustration, and after a few more harmless spells on Harry's part, she was getting hysterical, trying anything to get at him.

Her hands clawed the air manically, and somehow he slipped and let her get close enough for one of her wild hands to catch him, her nails grazing painfully the area just below his ear and along his jaw.

He thrust out his hands, angrily pushing her back.

She spun as she fell, and the side of her head was unfortunate enough to impact the top of the bedpost. Her neck bent in a way that looked painful and unnatural, and when her body thudded to the ground, she didn't move.

Harry approached her carefully. He was sure that at any moment she would open her eyes and leap up, but she remained still. She was lying on her side, and when he prodded her with his foot, she flopped over onto her stomach. He walked around to her other side and saw that her eyes were staring blankly, lifelessly. There was a darkish blotch on her temple where she'd impacted with the bed post.

He leaned down, hesitantly placing two fingers against her neck, searching for a pulse. He could feel nothing, but, not knowing if he was pressing in the right place, he felt for a pulse at her wrist, too. Again he could detect nothing. He held his hand for several moments an inch from her slack mouth, but there was no breath to warm his hand.

He'd killed her.

Killed Bellatrix Lestrange. His skin prickled and his vision wavered slightly as the fact washed over him. It was something he'd imagined, in the weeks after Sirius had died. He'd thought of so many different ways she could die; the Killing Curse, a cutting curse, but to fall like that, to be knocked down physically – it was so muggle. He smiled slightly at the irony as he stared down at her body.

It was almost frustrating that it had been accidental. He'd meant to hit her, sure, to hurt her, but not to kill. He wondered if he would have killed her, if he hadn't done it by accident.

He shook his head. He had a problem here. If she had been kept prisoner, which he suspected, the Order were going to find her body, unless he moved her. They'd know that someone had been into Grimmauld Place, unless he got rid of the body somewhere.

If he did that though, they might think she'd escaped. That left the Headquarters of the Order vulnerable. They certainly wouldn't use it for meetings anymore, and he didn't know where they'd go instead, besides Dumbledore's office.

On the other hand, there was already discord between members of the Order, already people who didn't trust each other. So what if there was one more thing for them to be suspicious of others about?

Yes, he decided, better to leave her here and let her be found dead than for them to worry that Grimmauld Place's whereabouts were known to anyone outside the Order.

His decision made, he looked around the room; the locket was almost certainly not in there. The only furniture in the room was a bed with a few tussled sheets, and a single chair, which had been knocked over in the fray.

Everything else had been cleared out, probably to the attic as well, or one of the other rooms on this level.

He looked back down at the dead body of Bellatrix Lestrange with an odd sense of detachment.

It was surprising; he'd thought it would feel sickening to kill another human being, but he felt nothing, now. He was numb about what he'd just done, and a small part of his mind told him it just hadn't hit him yet.

It was time for him to leave; there was nothing more he could do here tonight. The event that had unfolded might make it unsafe for him to come back here for a while, too, which didn't suit him, since he still had a good many boxes to go through.

Harry closed the door behind him, the lights in the room going off as he did so. He didn't know what spell they'd locked the door with, knew it hadn't been Alohamora, but it was the only locking charm he knew that wasn't in Parseltongue, and he couldn't use that one.

The lock clicked and he started down the stairs. He'd almost forgotten to be careful, when he heard muted voices from the lowest levels of the house. They'd probably just arrived and hadn't heard any commotion from the third floor.

His invisibility cloak, he realised, was bunched in his hand, which was silly given that paintings lined the walls of the house.

He felt a stab of fear; what if one of the paintings had seen him. Would they recognise him from the times he'd been here before? He cast a look at the nearest one as he pulled his cloak on. It was a landscape, but the one next to it was a portrait. The occupant was asleep.

Harry stepped closer. He'd seen many portraits pretending to sleep before, just so they wouldn't be bothered by people they didn't want to talk to, but this one looked to be genuinely at rest.

He hoped all the ones he'd passed had been.

Moving slowly so that he didn't make any noise, he made it downstairs without seeing anyone. There was a rectangle of light shining on the wall, from the open kitchen door and as he passed he caught sight of Remus and Tonks sitting at the scrubbed wooden table.

"I'll put some tea on," said Tonks, beginning to stand, but Remus jumped up and pushed her down gently.

"You just rest, honey. I'll get it."

Tonks smiled brightly, and that was the last Harry saw as he went on into the darkness of the hallway beyond the kitchen.

Mrs. Black's portrait was covered and he took extra care as he passed not to disturb it. The front door opened easily, soundlessly, and he slipped outside into the cool night air.

It had been his intention to return to Hogwarts immediately, but now that he was out in the fresh air, away from the oppressive atmosphere of number 12, he didn't feel like going back to the castle.

The cobbled street of Grimmauld Place was fairly quiet, but coming out onto the next street, he found it quite busy. It was a Friday night after all; it was expected that there would be lots of people out. He wandered along it for a while, until he felt he was safely far enough from Grimmauld Place. He ducked into an alleyway and pulled his cloak off, and then his robe.

In his shirt and old jeans, he stepped out of the alleyway and onto the footpath.

He felt looser and freer out of the clinging robes and he rolled his neck, stiff from the time he'd spent hunched over boxes.

He walked along the street slowly.

He'd gone looking for a stupid piece of jewellery, and on top of the fact that he hadn't found it, he'd killed someone. Great. Fan-bloody-tastic.

It then occurred to Harry that he shouldn't be here. He should be at Hogwarts. He didn't want to be missing when Bellatrix was found dead, and as far as he knew, that could already have happened.

He stood abruptly and walked into a busy pub, heading for the toilets and quickly finding an empty stall. He closed the door, though he didn't lock it. It bounced against the frame, and by the time it swung open, he had disappeared.



He hurried up through the darkness of the school grounds and into the castle. Looking at his watch, he saw that it was past curfew, though not too far past. He hurried up to Gryffindor Tower, to find Snape talking with Ron at the portrait of the Fat Lady. They looked at him as he approached.

“Mr. Potter, there you are,” said Snape, his tone reprimanding Harry.

“What?” he snarled, and a shocked look appeared on both Snape’s and Ron’s faces.

“I am returning your bag, which you were thoughtless enough to leave in my office,” replied Snape, pursing his lips at Harry’s belligerent tone. His eyes roved Harry’s appearance. “Where is your school uniform?”

Harry realised his robe was still shrunken, in one of his jeans pockets.

Snape took a step closer, crossing his arms across his chest and looking down his nose at Harry. “Where have you been?”

“Nowhere. The library.”

“Doing what?” enquired Snape silkily. “Surely not homework, without your things.”

“Maybe I was just reading.”

“And Madam Pince failed to clear you out when curfew passed?”

“I guess she didn’t see me,” he retorted, hands on hips. He didn’t care if Snape believed him or not. He just wanted to be left alone.

After a few more questions from Snape, who finally took fifteen points for being out after curfew and told Harry to never leave his things in Snape’s office again or he’d throw them in the bin, Harry grabbed his bag off Ron and marched up to his dorm.

Harry collapsed onto the edge of his bed, overcome with weariness. He leaned his elbows on his knees, his head cradled in his hands.

After a few moments he opened his eyes, letting them adjust to the dark.

He felt his body tense.

There was a splash of blood on the boots he'd gotten from Niall and Ana. He cast a charm and the blood disappeared, but it wasn't good enough. He still felt like they were tainted.

He pulled both boots off and took them into the bathroom, locking the door with a Parseltongue command so that no one else could get in.

Running hot water, he cleaned them both thoroughly, and then took them back to the dormitory and polished them fanatically.

He finally put them away when the boys started coming into bed, complaining at the smell. Someone cast an air-freshening charm, and the smell of polish dissipated.

As he pulled the curtains around his bed and laid down, he wished it were as easy as that to wash away what he was feeling.

oOo

It was not the best day for Harry to be playing Quidditch.

His head was killing him, he'd gotten very little sleep the previous night, and every time he closed his eyes, he saw Bellatrix's blank eyes staring at him. His thoughts kept drifting back to the previous evening, no matter what he did to distract himself.

He'd hardly spoken a word all morning, and Ron and Hermione had been shooting him worried looks all morning.

Soon enough, it was time for them to be getting ready for the Quidditch game. He walked with Ron and Ginny down to the changing rooms, broom in hand.

He looked at himself in the mirror as he dressed. He looked gaunt; his face was white and there were dark bags beneath his eyes. He saw, with a touch of surprise, that his hair had grown quite a bit. It had been a while since he'd cut it, and it was now chin length.

Only now did it occur to him that no one had asked about the scratch on his face, and he realised that, along with his scar, it was mostly covered by his hair. He pushed the dark strands aside, revealing three long scarlet cuts, and a fourth shorter, lighter one.

He'd have to go to Madam Pomfrey and get something for that. It was obvious that he'd been scratched, and quite nastily. He didn't want people asking questions, especially when Bellatrix was found dead.

He realised that she'd almost certainly be found today, if she hadn't already, and from then after he was plagued with worry that Aurors would come marching onto the Quidditch pitch and drag him off.

Of course, the only Aurors that would know about it were Tonks and Kingsley, and any other Order members. He reminded himself that he hadn't been seen, repeating it in his head like a mantra, and trying to ignore the niggling voice in his head that told him the hallways of Grimmauld place were lined with potential spy holes. Anyone in any of the paintings he'd passed could have witnessed him there, and if they had it would be all too soon before he was called to Dumbledore's office.

He shook the thoughts from his head and found that he was standing on the Quidditch Pitch. He couldn't remember walking out there.

Madam Hooch was shouting into the wind, though he wasn't really listening to what she was saying. He tilted his head, assessing her. If he squinted, she actually looked like Bellatrix, with her black hair, square jaw and heavily-lidded eyes.

He didn't hear her blow the whistle, and everyone else was already several metres into the air before he realised and pushed off from the ground.

He shot straight up above everyone else, and the other seeker did the same. Hufflepuff had a new seeker now, though Harry was too distracted to remember the girl's name.

His eyes scanned the pitch. He wasn't particularly enthused about this game, he had to admit. He'd been looking forward to it for weeks but now, all he wanted to do was catch the Snitch so the game could end and he could go somewhere and find some peace and quiet.

He probably wouldn't have even cared too much if it wasn't him who caught it.

...

It turned out that it was Harry who caught the Snitch, five hours later.

An hour after that, and they were once again being clapped and cheered as the team entered the common room after showering.

Someone had supplied the usual party-after-a-Quidditch-win food and beverages, and everyone was having a good time. The whole house was milling around the common room and it wasn't hard for him to slip away after a while.

He took the stairs up to the dormitory two at a time, pulling his invisibility cloak out of his trunk and pulling it on as soon as he got through the door.

He went back downstairs. There was no need to be quiet; a group of boys was singing loudly, standing on a table, and everyone else was laughing and chatting happily.

He snagged a bottle of firewhisky and a butterbeer off a table as he passed, drawing them beneath his cloak.

As soon as he was a few minutes away, he pulled off the cloak and wrapped the two bottles in it. He headed towards Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, nodding politely to anyone who congratulated him on winning.

Suddenly a figure stepped out of a classroom right in front of him, and he nearly ran into them.

“Look where you going,” he breathed, stepping around them.

“Potter!”

He looked up, seeing that it was Malfoy.

He stared for a second, and felt his face flush, sure that Malfoy could read what he’d done on his face.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow at the reaction. “Something wrong?”

Harry shook his head and walked on.

“You’re going to the Chamber,” stated Malfoy, falling into step beside him. “Why aren’t you celebrating your win?”

Harry didn’t answer.

“I suppose, it was only Hufflepuff. Not really much of a victory after all.” Malfoy stuck his hand out, running his fingers lightly along the stone wall as they walked. “I heard Boot had 6 Galleons on Hufflepuff to win. Idiot. And he calls himself a Ravenclaw.”

Harry grunted in reply.

They reached the bathroom and Malfoy strode in first, but then stood back so that Harry could open the sink.

Harry did so and then turned to the Slytherin. “Look, I-”

Before he could tell Malfoy he wanted to be alone though, the Slytherin had walked past him and slipped into the tunnel.

Harry scowled and slipped in after him, the stone sliding shut behind him and obliterating all light in the tunnel.

He held up his hand and muttered a lumos, and a bright ball of light opened up in his palm. He dropped his hand and let it hover ahead of him as they walked.

Malfoy admired the ball of light as they walked. "How many wandless spells can you do?"

Harry shrugged. "A few. All it takes is practice."

Malfoy finally seemed to catch on to the fact that Harry wasn't in a talkative mood, because they spent the rest of the journey in silence.

In the library, Harry dragged the low table closer to the lounge and unwrapped the two bottles from his cloak. He placed them on the table and hung his cloak over the back of the lounge, sinking down onto the cushions with a sigh.

"Didn't feel like sharing with your friends?" asked Malfoy, taking the other end of the lounge.

Harry leaned his head against the back of the lounge with his eyes closed. "I came down here for peace and quiet, Malfoy, not to hear smart comments from you."

"That doesn't really answer my question, you realise? You know, most people would be happy about catching the snitch, even if it was against Hufflepuff."

Harry gave a resigned sigh and sat up straighter. Malfoy clearly felt chatty. He leaned forward to grab the butterbeer, but before his fingers could close around the tankard, Malfoy's hand shot out and grabbed it. The Slytherin twisted the lid off and took a swig.

Harry pursed his lips and grabbed the bottle of firewhisky instead. He twisted the lid off, the seal making a cracking sound as it broke. He had no glasses, so he took a long drink straight out of the bottle. It burned his throat on the way down and he coughed.

Salz appeared from somewhere, his tongue flickering at the air as he curled around Harry's neck. He hissed softly in Harry's ear and then slithered over to say hello to the Slytherin.

"Traitor," muttered Harry, swallowing another mouthful from the bottle.

"He knows who the Slytherin here is," said Malfoy, running a finger over Salazar's scales.

Harry didn't bother to tell Malfoy that Salazar was hissing about the meal he'd just eaten and was just looking for a comfortable place to digest.

Harry drummed his fingers on his leg, feeling distinctly on edge. It was late afternoon now, and he was in no doubt that the Order knew Bellatrix was dead. They'd be trying to find out who'd been in the house the previous evening, be asking all the portraits of they'd seen anyone, heard anything.

And what if one of them had? To say he would be in major trouble was an understatement.

Harry knew it would only be luck that got him out of this, the chance that none of the portraits had seen him. They'd all been sleeping, or visiting other portraits.

"Going to share that Potter?" Malfoy's demanding voice brought him out of his thoughts.

Harry considered the bottle and then held it out. Malfoy reached over with an arm which Salz was curled around. He'd abandoned the butterbeer to the table.

They passed the bottle back and forwards for a while, until Harry was feeling pleasantly numb.

An overwhelming feeling of guilt bubbled up in Harry every time he looked at Malfoy.

Was this how Snape felt every time he looked at Harry? Did he feel better now that the truth had been revealed? Harry thought he should ask Snape. Maybe if he told Malfoy what he'd done, the guilt wouldn't be weighing quite so heavily on him.

He held out his hand for the bottle and Malfoy passed it back.

It wasn't the fact that he'd killed Bellatrix Lestrange that made him feel guilty; she'd deserved it, no doubt, and even though he hadn't planned to do anything of the sort, he'd still felt some sick sense of satisfaction at seeing her lifeless body and knowing he'd done it.

What he felt guilty about was the fact that he'd killed Malfoy's aunt. Harry didn't doubt the Slytherin had had a better relationship with her than he had.

"Do you like your aunt?" he asked suddenly, looking over at Malfoy.

The Slytherin look back at Harry, seemingly surprised by the question. He shrugged. "I suppose. She is my aunt, after all."

"Yeah, but I have an aunt and I don't like her. She's horrible, always has been. But she's much nicer than your aunt."

"My aunt's nice to me. I can't help it that she doesn't like you. Lots of people I know don't like you."

"Nice of you to say."

Malfoy shrugged and grinned. "A Malfoy never lies."

Harry snorted. "Unless it suits them."

"You never told me who that girl you liked is," he commented, not wanting to dwell on depressing subjects.

Malfoy smiled dreamily up at the ceiling, swirling the bottle clumsily in his hand before swallowing a mouthful and passing it off to Harry.



The Slytherin hummed placidly as he gazed at the high ceiling. "I told you you could guess."

Harry waved his hand languidly. "I don't knooooow! All you've told me is she's in Slytherin and not a seventh year."

"I guess you'll never know," said Malfoy in a sing-song voice that made Harry laugh.

"Hey, at least I have a girlfriend, or I will, when she agrees to go out with me." Malfoy pouted.

"Ha! She doesn't even like you back."

"Yes she does!"

"Well, unlike you, I actually have a girlfriend!" retorted Harry.

"Oh, who!? The Weaslette?" Malfoy laughed at the idea.

"No, of course not," he laughed, thinking that it had been a while since he'd talked to Ginny. He should, soon. "Her name's Aislinn." He smiled as he thought of her. The smile dropped from his face as he wondered what she would think of him if she knew what he'd done.

"Aislinn? What house is she in?" Malfoy frowned, clearly trying to match a face to the name.

"She doesn't go to Hogwarts."

"Muggle," repeated Malfoy, his tone disparaging. "I should have guessed."

"She doesn't know who I am," said Harry quietly, ignoring Malfoy's obligatory anti-muggle comment.

"Are you saying she thinks you have some other desirable quality besides being famous?" joked Malfoy.

Harry laughed as well. "I guess so."

Malfoy leaned over with a wicked look, his eyes slightly unfocussed from the alcohol. "Did she give it up for you yet?"

Harry choked, spilling the last small bit of firewhisky all over himself. "Don't ask me that!"

Malfoy laughed and pushed himself off the lounge. "I'll take that as... no!"

Harry felt his face flush, and he threw the firewhisky bottle at the Slytherin. Malfoy tried to avoid it, but his reactions were somewhat slowed by the considerable amount of alcohol he'd had, and the bottle hit him, though not hard.

He weaved slightly and collapsed in a heap on the ground, chuckling. "Ow."

Harry laughed as Malfoy climbed unsteadily to his feet again.

"I have an idea!" announced the Slytherin dramatically, holding a finger up.

"What?" asked Harry, pushing himself into a standing position. The room spun slightly, but stopped after a moment.

"Let's go outside. We need to try out my fire resistance."

Harry's eyes grew wide. "That's a great idea! Where should we go?"

Malfoy scratched at his head, thinking. "Down near the lake, there's that big open patch of grass; it'll be perfect."

Harry nodded, and Malfoy took off for the stairs. "No, wait, we can use the Pendant. It'll be heaps faster."

Malfoy ran back, pulling the chain over his head. Moments later they were standing forty metres from the lake, the silvery moon shining down on them.

“Get your wand out,” commanded Malfoy, and Harry did so. In front of him, Malfoy performed the animagus transformation.

“Wow... you’re really big.” Harry craned his neck up, but it was too dark, and Malfoy’s head was too high for him to see it.

Harry brandished his wand at the huge dragon in front of him, then pointed it at the ground near the dragon’s foot. “Incendio!”

The dragon flinched away, but then seemed to relax. The grass around them started to burn, though there was dew on the grass and it didn’t catch very well. The dragons tail flicked towards the small flames, and then held still in one of the bigger ones. The flame licked around the tail.

“Cool,” breathed Harry. “You can’t feel that?”

The dragon shook its head, his long neck twisting around to look. Suddenly Malfoy’s head shot up, and moments later he transformed back to his human form and looked at Harry, whispering, “I think someone’s coming.”

Harry scanned the dark grounds. “I can’t see anyone.” He listened hard. “I can’t hear anyone either. Are you sure?”

“I thought I heard talking. Dragons have superior hearing to humans.”

They moved silently to a stand of trees, and then out onto the other side. “We should go back to the castle,” suggested Harry, feeling suddenly tired. He wanted to curl up on the ground and go to sleep.

Malfoy nodded and they started off again.

A woman’s voice spoke, and Harry froze, feeling Malfoy do the same thing beside him.

“Remus, stop; I thought I heard something.”

A moment later, Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks came into view.

Harry yanked Malfoy next to him and fumbled around for his invisibility cloak, throwing it over both of them.

They jostled around, making sure it was over both of them.

"Is it working?" asked Malfoy. "Why are they stopping?"

"Shh, shh - they can't see us if we don't talk. Stay still, too."

Malfoy jerked to an attention position, his arms straight by his sides.

Harry sniggered, trying not to laugh, but he just made Malfoy snigger as well.

They'd stopped, and Lupin was looking at Tonks. Harry nudged Malfoy. "See?" he whispered, "They've got no idea."

"Do you think Lupin can smell us?" whispered back Malfoy, his eyes widening with the realisation. "Don't werewolves have a better sense of smell than normal wizards?"

"Don't be silly, that's only when they're transformed."

"Not, it's all the time, I'm telling you."

"Well then he can probably hear you too, so be quiet."

"You're talking too!"

"Oh, look, now he's looking this way." Harry huffed in annoyance.

Remus was giving an amused smile in their direction. "You may as well come out from under that cloak, Harry. And friend. We can see your feet."

Tonks laughed. "Someone's been drinking, I think. Lucky we caught you before Snape or McGonagall did."

Harry pursed his lips in annoyance at the Slytherin and then dragged of the cloak. The smile fell off both their faces.

“Hi Remus.” Harry smiled stupidly. “Hi Tonks.”

“Draco!” exclaimed Tonks. “Harry, what are you doing with him?”

“Ssh! Don’t tell!” said Malfoy in a carrying whisper.

“Nothing. We were just walking,” improvised Harry. He pointed at the ground. “Look, you can even see our footprints.”

Harry looked at Malfoy to see if Malfoy was happy with the story, but the Slytherin was looking thoughtfully at Tonks, his eyes narrowed.

“Are you pregnant?” Draco gave a theatrical shiver. “I’m going to have half-breed second-cousins.”

“First cousins, once removed,” corrected Harry.

Malfoy frowned thoughtfully. “Oh, yeah. Gross.”

Harry looked at Tonks. “You’re really having a baby?” he asked, looking hard at her belly and seeing there was a bump. “Congratulations!”

Remus cleared his throat. “Well, er, thankyou Harry. We’re very happy.”

“When’s it due?”

“Just short of three months now,” replied Tonks, still eyeing Malfoy with worry.

“Perhaps we should be getting up to the castle now,” suggested Lupin. “Come on.”

They all walked up to the castle, stopping in the Entrance Hall. “Are you going to report us?” asked Malfoy loudly. “You can’t take points off us.”

“We’ll see.”

Malfoy crossed his arms and scowled.

Lupin turned to his wife. “Tonks, if you want to see Harry back to the Tower, I’ll accompany Mr. Malfoy.”

“Alright, I’ll meet you up there,” replied Tonks.

“I don’t need an escort,” pouted Malfoy. I can find the way on my own. he started off, still weaving slightly as he walked.

“All the same, I’d feel happier seeing you there myself. He nodded to Tonks and then directed Malfoy away.

Harry and Tonks set off in the opposite direction.

“Is there an Order meeting?” asked Harry in a loud, conspiratorial whisper. “Why so late? Has something happened?”

Tonks pursed her lips. “No, nothing’s happened. This was the only time we could all get together this week, that’s all.”

“Oh... what are you going to call the baby?”

Tonks smiled brightly. “We haven’t decided yet, but we’ve got a few names. We don’t know if it’s a boy or a girl yet, though, so we have a few names for both.”

Harry nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

Tonks tone changed. “Harry, I’m a little concerned about this interaction with a Malfoy. What’s going on there?”

Harry shrugged. “Nothing. We were just having some fun, that’s all.”

Tonks sighed. “Just be careful, okay? You can’t trust a Malfoy.”

“He can’t tell anyone, anyway,” replied Harry, in a tone which suggested that solved everything.

“What do you mean? Tell anyone what?”

“Anything. He promised.”

Harry nodded and then patted Tonks’ spiky head. “Goodnight.” Harry climbed through the portrait hole, with a bit of assistance from Tonks.

“Night Harry.”

Tonks nodded once more with a small smile, and then closed the portrait of the Fat Lady between them.

oOo

Well, I hope everyone is enjoying my sorely lacking, horribly repetitive and pretty boring story. :P

Thanks to all you fantastic reviewers : )

Slytherin66, ams71080, JustAnotherParallelDimension, Melora, BadGirlgoesworse, nxkris, pink-fogg, oceanlover14, tiny099, ching965, Lady Black-Malfoy, Pheonix Eternia, black-heart-green-eyes, Sweet Heavens, Stygian Styx, Balatros, cyiusblack, austin316hockey, ShadowBreaking, purpleflyingmonkeys and

Persidie: I too am lazy, but since I’m writing in word, it capitalises your name for me. Sexual tension!? Really?.... thanks for the review : )

## Shifting Perspectives

And now for something completely different, just because we're at 1000 reviews. At the suggestion of Slytherin66, I've decided to put in this chapter with some different viewpoints. Some people also wanted to know the Order's reaction to Bellatrix's death, so we see some of that. This chapter follows straight on from the last one, when Tonks left Harry.

oOo

Nymphadora Tonks turned away from the portrait with growing unease and set off toward the Headmaster's office.

She just couldn't wrap her head around the scene she and Remus had found. Secrets and promises between a Gryffindor and a Slytherin were surprising, between Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy was shocking and disturbing. Of course she couldn't be entirely sure there were secrets or promises between them. She couldn't bring herself to trust the ramblings of an obviously drunk teenage boy.

And what was Harry doing, letting himself get into such a situation with someone like Draco Malfoy?

Tonks knew her Aunt Narcissa, and she also knew Narcissa's husband Lucius. A dangerous man with a dangerous and powerful influence. Even worse was her Aunt Bellatrix. A sadistic, twisted woman and far more dangerous than Lucius. She was in no doubt that Draco had been influenced in undesirable directions throughout his young life from his family and their associates.

If Draco was associating with Harry, there was nothing good that could come of it. This would definitely need to be discussed, tonight.

She'd reached the gargoyle now, and she spoke the password. The spiral staircase took her up to the oak door.

Sighing, she reached out and turned the handle.



oOo

Beside him, the handle of the door turned.

Severus stepped to the side to avoid being hit by the door. He'd been standing silently in Dumbledore's office, surveying the rest of the gathered Order members.

He'd lightly breezed across their minds, one at a time. No one had felt it; he was too good for that, plus they were all preoccupied at the moment. Preoccupied with the death of Bellatrix Lestrangle.

As a matter of policy, he wouldn't normally intrude on his colleague's private thoughts... well, no that was a lie. But he was particularly intrigued at the thought that one of the people in this room may have acted alone and cut short the life of a Death Eater for their own, personal reasons.

Even though he'd expected it, he had amused him to find that a good number of them suspected him of having done it, given his history. He had made no secret of having hated the woman, and they all knew he had been a victim of her curses on the night he had been found as a spy. He certainly had motive. If he was honest with himself, and he always was, he was actually disappointed he hadn't had the chance to exact a little personal vengeance on her.

He was not the only one who had motive, however. Everyone had hated Bellatrix Lestrangle, some more than others.

Moody's eye had been on him since he'd entered the room. Now there was a man who would have taken great pleasure in the act. He'd spent a good few years chasing down the Lestranges, only to have them escape Azkaban years later. Yes, Moody had had a deeply seated hatred for Bellatrix.

Kingsley was the Auror tracking her down now, at least officially. Snape ruled him out though. Kingsley was a bit of a gentle giant, when all was said and done. The man could duel, could kill if the situation called for it, but Bellatrix had been safely secured and

Kingsley would never have taken matters into his own hands when she was already under their control.

And the younger Auror, Nymphadora Tonks. Her relationship with her aunt certainly hadn't been amicable. She played by the rules though, most of the time.

Speaking of Nymphadora... he caught her spiky black hair from the corner of his eye as she closed the door behind her and stood quietly beside him. That was odd in itself. She was very rarely quiet.

He enjoyed an odd relationship with the young Auror. She was one of the few who he knew trusted him implicitly, and she was sharp enough he could enjoy an intelligent, witty conversation with her now and then. Only Merlin knew why she'd taken up with someone such as Lupin, but now that they were together, he could never quite see either of them with anyone else.

"Nymphadora, wonderful to see you," he intoned, a sarcastic lilt in his voice. "How is the baby?"

"Fine, thank you for asking."

"And where is that wolfishly handsome husband of yours this fine evening?"

Tonks sniffed and crossed her arms in a defensive posture. She smiled sweetly. "Don't start, Sevvie."

He cringed inwardly at the ridiculous name. She was the only person who had ever dared to call him such, and she was the only person who would ever get away with it.

"Actually," she continued, "He's accompanying one of your students to the dungeons."

"Oh?" he enquired.

"Yes, my dear cousin Draco. Remus and I found him as we were walking up through the grounds. He seemed to be quite intoxicated."

"Well, it is a Saturday night, after all," he replied.

Tonks snorted. "No wonder your house lacks discipline, if that's your attitude."

"Come now, Nymphadora. Surely you had similar experiences during your time at Hogwarts. I can recall many occasions, in fact-

"Maybe so, but his intoxication is hardly the issue, anyway. What I find concerning is the fact that that he's gallivanting about in the middle of the night, wandering the school grounds with-

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. "I couldn't care less, Nymphadora, if he was frolicking with Santa Clause. There are more important issues at hand right now, not least of which is your dear Aunt's unfortunate demise."

"And what about if it was Harry Potter?"

Snape frowned. "Potter?"

"Yes Harry Potter, and they seemed pretty chummy, if you ask me."

He finally turned to face the young woman. "A word I never thought I'd hear describing my godson and Harry Potter." He noticed the worry lines that were creasing her forehead.

"I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. Alcohol and teenage boys can lead to unpredictable circumstances." He wasn't sure if he believed that was the complete truth in this instance, however.

"It isn't the first time I've seen them together. You remember the instances I mentioned when I was posing as a student."

"From what I understood that was merely talk about their joint potions assignment. No one has seen them together even once this year, to my knowledge."

“Well, maybe that’s true and maybe it’s not. All I’m suggesting is that maybe instead of having Owens and Mulgrave keep an eye on Harry, which I think we can both agree just does not work, we should have them tailing Draco, instead.”

Severus nodded slowly. “Perhaps talk with Kingsley about it. I agree Potter has proven to be exceedingly elusive and resourceful when it comes to disappearing and accessing places he shouldn’t b-” He broke off, a sudden thought hitting him like a brick.

Almost immediately, he tossed it aside as ridiculous, but for the rest of the meeting, it continued to nag at the back of his mind...

At that point the door handle turned again. He caught Nymphadora by the elbow and pulled her gently out of the way so she wasn’t knocked over by the door. Not that that was something she couldn’t accomplish on her own, but she was with child. It was the decent thing to do.

Shame, too. He was in a foul mood, and displays of clumsiness were generally amusing. All fun and games, or so the saying went.

The latecomer was Lupin. He felt his lip twitch in an automatic sneer. Ironically, if it weren’t for the annoyingly mild-mannered werewolf’s activities behind different, closed doors, Severus would be wearing a smile right now, while Nymphadora picked herself up off the floor.

“Draco is back in his room now?” asked Tonks, wrapping an arm around Lupin’s waist.

Lupin smiled, wrapping his own arm around his wife. “Yes. No doubt he’ll be feeling a little the worse for wear come morning.”

The meeting began.

“You all know why we are here this evening, rather than meeting at our more usual location.”

Everyone around the room nodded or murmured their assent, someone exclaiming, "I don't understand how someone found out the address, to sneak in and kill her!"

Severus rolled his eyes at the stupid statement. It was obvious someone from the Order had done it. He for one was extremely interested in who had had the backbone to cross Albus.

Albus stroked his beard. "I believe our Headquarters is still safe."

"So you are saying someone from the Order is responsible?"

Severus bit back a stinging retort. These meetings were always a constant battle to do so.

"It would seem that way," replied Albus. "I am certain no one outside of the Order has gained knowledge of the address. We have been exceedingly careful about that."

"The Dark Lord was exceedingly careful about such measures as well."

Dumbledore inclined his head in Severus' direction. "Nonetheless I am sure. The question is what we do about it."

"None of us are comfortable with the idea that someone is acting alone, if in fact that is the case. I'm trying to believe it was an accident," said Arthur.

"You placed the charms on that room yourself, Albus. Who could have broken past them?" asked Pomona.

"The charms I placed ensured Bellatrix could not escape. Alas, I admit I did not cast charms specifically to keep others out. I thought there no need."

The room was silent for a few moments.

“Well I say we find out who did it,” stated Moody. “We make a list of all Order members, and then start striking off names to narrow it down.”

No one really agreed nor disagreed with Moody’s suggestion, so the ex-Auror produced a quill and parchment.

Somewhat reluctantly, everyone in the room called their names out one by one, and then started on names of Order members who were not present.

“Mulgrave and Owens,” said Kingsley, naming the two Aurors who were stationed at Hogwarts.

“Molly, of course,” said Arthur.

“Dung.”

Severus snorted at the thought that the seedy man could have surpassed charms cast by Dumbledore. There were few in the Order who could, and even for those with the ability it would take some time.

There was a minute of silence as people racked their brains for anyone they might have missed. “The children; the Weasleys, Granger, Potter,” he suggested.

Moody let out a bark of laughter. “None of those kids have the gumption to commit such a crime, Snape.”

Severus spared the Auror a withering glance. “Neither do half the other people on that ridiculous list. I am simply stating their names for completeness. It wouldn’t do to leave anyone out merely because we think they didn’t do it. Surely you don’t think everyone on the list did do it.”

Kingsley nodded. “Best to cover all the angles, I agree.”

A few more people were named and the list was complete.

“What now?” asked someone.

“Now we cross off who couldn’t have been there. Anyone with an alibi,” replied Moody, promptly marking off what Severus presumed was his own name.

People began giving alibis, and Moody wrote them down with, Severus assumed, the intention to check them later on.

He didn’t bother giving his own alibi; this whole process was a farce, completely ridiculous. Anyone with a spare five minutes could have apparated to Grimmauld Place, entered, killed, and left.

Then again, the manner of the death had not appeared particularly well planned. That was what was odd about it. None of the Order members, he was sure, were quite that idiotic that they would wander in by accident, or just to have a chat.

“It’s getting rather late, and I’m sure we’d all rather be in bed now. We’ll take this up in the next meeting,” announced Dumbledore, much to Severus’ relief.

“If you ask me, we’d gotten enough out of her anyway,” growled Moody, rolling up the list and handing it to Dumbledore.

“Enough that she could be done away with, perhaps?” Severus suggested silkily, rejoicing in the way Moody instantly fired up at the implication he was making.

He smirked, ignoring the disapproving look Minerva shot his way. She could purse her lips and glare all she wanted; it was only Moody’s reaction he wasn’t interested in. Right now, the look on Moody’s face said he wanted to kill him.

“Is there any other business?” asked Dumbledore loudly.

Severus glanced sideways at Lupin and Nymphadora. They both looked unsure about mentioning it, but the young Auror decided to.

“Yes, there’s something worth mentioning,” she said loudly, to override the chatter that had started to break out.

"It's Harry. On the way up to the castle Remus and I found him, along with Draco Malfoy."

Concerned murmurs sounded around the room.

"They'd apparently been drinking, and were wandering the grounds together. We asked what they were doing and they'd clearly been up to something, but wouldn't tell us."

Moody gave an audible growl. "I said it, you all heard me. They should never've been allowed to associate." The grizzled Auror looked directly at him. "And it's you that's encouraged it, Snape. First in Defence, and then you placed them together in potions."

"The first was a tactical decision on their part, the second luck of the draw, Alastor. I doubt either instance kindled any sort of friendship between them."

"Friendship's not what I'm worried about, Snape. Malfoys are sneaky, conniving creatures, and Potter's not the shrewdest individual you could meet. Naive, he is."

"He can be a little too trusting at times, and very forgiving," agreed Lupin. "But I really doubt he's silly enough to--"

"To go running round drunk with a Death Eater?" snapped Moody. "For all we know, that Slytherin scum was about to lead him off the grounds and into You-Know-Who's waiting arms."

"I highly doubt that is the case," hissed Severus, fed up with the Auror's constant disparaging remarks.

"I have to agree with Severus," supplied Lupin. "I've never seen the boys exchange a friendly word. As far as I can see, Harry's had a little too much to drink after their Quidditch victory and gone running about with the wrong person."

"What if that's not the case?" growled Moody, pausing for effect. "Maybe he's been converted."



"That's preposterous, Alastor, really!" replied Minerva indignantly. Severus privately agreed, and judging by the grumbling in the room, so did everyone else.

Dumbledore sighed. "Well, perhaps I shall have a talk with Harry."

"It would certainly be a good idea to remind him to be more careful. I don't think there was any danger involved tonight, but that might not be the case next time," said Arthur, picking his cloak off the arm of the chair it was hung over.

"I agree," put in Sprout from a chair on the other side of the room. "And I think when they both wake up tomorrow and realise just who they were living it up with, they'll think twice about drinking so much in future." Several of his colleagues in the room tittered amongst themselves.

He of all people had to admit it was unlikely in the extreme that there was any sort of friendship between the two. That particular notion could be safely dismissed.

Shortly after, the office began to empty.

Severus waited silently to be joined by Minerva, who was having a quiet word with Arthur. The two finished their conversation and he nodded goodnight to the redheaded man. Severus offered his arm to his elder colleague, and they set off towards her office in a comfortable silence. It would have to be broken however, because Severus had things on his mind that needed to be discussed. "You are Potter's Head of House, Minerva. I wonder, have you noticed anything odd in his behaviour lately?"

After a moment's thought, she answered. "He has seemed distant these past months, and quite obviously preoccupied, but that is to be expected, with all the extra lessons he is taking from you. Most lately... his mood seems to fluctuate quite dramatically. One day he seems quite at ease, the next..." She shrugged and he nodded, understanding.

"It is dark days, Severus, and I fear for the poor boy. He has far too much on his shoulders for one so young."

"And yet he insists on carrying more," muttered Snape, his mind wandering again to what truly concerned him at the present moment.

Potter has shown the ability to surpass wards and passwords with the use of Parseltongue. That could possibly explain how he'd gained access to the room Bellatrix had been kept in, though he didn't offer the explanation to his colleague. Why Potter may have done so was the more important question, and there was no plausible reason that he could think of. Potter had no way of knowing who was in that room, and no other reason to go in there.

"Yesterday evening, I encountered him outside of the Gryffindor Common Room in an exceedingly agitated state."

"What are you saying?"

Snape sighed tiredly. "You know of course, that I have been training Potter in the mind arts. They regularly leave him in a restless state, a bad mood. Perhaps that is all it was. However, I saw him several hours later and he seemed... worse than when he left my office. Worse than usual. I simply wonder if something else passed in the intervening time."

"You can't honestly think-"

"You cannot deny he held a grudge against her."

"No, but Severus... that's a preposterous idea."

Severus closed his eyes and let out a long breath, rolling his neck. "Yes... perhaps it is."

He looked down at Minerva and gave a wry smile. "I am getting too old to be worrying about such things as hormonal teenagers, too old for this job."

“You’re not even forty yet, Severus. Wait until you get to my age and see how you feel.”

“Oh, but Minerva, you are only getting finer with age.”

Minerva smiled, coming to a stop and tapping her wand against the handle of her office door.

“I shall keep a closer eye on Mr. Potter, perhaps have a talk with him.”

Severus inclined his head, bid her goodnight, and swept away, heading to the dungeons.

oOo

Minerva watched Severus sweep down the corridor before closing her door and doing what she always did to relieve stress. She sat back at her desk with a pot of tea and a tin of mixed biscuits, musing on the events of the evening.

Nymphadora and Remus’ recount had been had been concerning, but she was inclined to believe it was a bit of an anomalous event, just alcohol causing a lapse in judgement on both their parts.

She thought back to the appearance of the parchment holding the address to Malfoy Manor. They’d all thought it highly suspicious, even when it turned out not to have been a trap.

They’d captured one of Voldemort’s most trusted Death Eaters in the raid, and several doses of Veritaserum had her spilling the secrets she knew. Including the fact that her nephew was a Death Eater, had been marked since the day after his seventeenth birthday, and been training long before that.

It always saddened her to see students take that path, but she supposed that in that particular case it had been inevitable, ever since the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

The fact was that the parchment had been written by a member of the Malfoy family, and left quite deliberately where it would be found by the Order, or at the very least by Albus Dumbledore.

She wouldn't even begin to contemplate how they'd gotten past Albus' wards. Anyone who had ever been summoned to the office knew the password was always some kind of lolly, but other wards sprang up if he was not there.

Minerva dunked a newt biscuit into her tea.

She simply couldn't begin to imagine that the Malfoy boy had left it. She knew Malfoys, and they didn't risk themselves. But if he had, and he and the young Mr. Potter had some kind of alliance, that could explain how the Gryffindor had known that the Lestrangle woman was being kept at Headquarters, or at least being kept somewhere by the Order. Bellatrix is taken prisoner, Narcissa or Lucius Malfoy mention it to their son, or he hears it from any other Death Eater, and then passes it on himself.

Should she mention it to Severus? No, he already worried about the boy enough, and if it was a logical thought, he would think it on his own.

At any rate, the idea was ridiculous, both that the Slytherin and Gryffindor were in cahoots, and that Harry Potter had had anything to do with the death.

Just quietly, between herself and no one else, she applauded whoever had done away with the woman. Bellatrix Lestrangle had been a blight upon England, nay, the whole world, and it was a brighter future that did not have her in it.

Minerva spooned half a teaspoon of sugar from a tin into her tea, stirring it in to the hot amber liquid.

oOo

Serenius Mobrey looked up from his methodical stirring when a dark shadow passed in front of his canvas. "Snape, old boy!"

A pale face appeared inches from the canvas, shadowed by the oily strands of hair that fell around it.

“Hello Serenius. Working late tonight, I see.”

Serenius nodded, finishing the forty-nine clockwise stirs and hanging the curl of the ladle over the lip of the cauldron.

He looked out at one of the only people who had ever correctly guessed a brew. He'd been the last, if he discounted those two infernal, arrogant, self-assured students of late. Still, perhaps they would turn out for the better. The young Severus Snape certainly seemed to have; a man after his own heart, he was.

Serenius grinned slyly. “Any guesses forthcoming?”

Snape leaned forward, peering as best he could into the cauldron.

His brow furrowed slightly. “I see a light coloured potion... green.”

Serenius nodded.

“A silver sheen over the surface.”

Serenius nodded once more.

“A cool fire.”

Snape's eyes moved from the cauldron to the table, his eyes squinting to see better. “Almond flowers and honeydew.”

“Correctly identified.” They were the only ingredients Serenius had chosen to leave visible.

“Andromeda's Mist?”

“Rah! Surely-orley is, Snapey!”

“Strange...” murmured Snape. “Have you given any students a hint about this potion, the smell of it, perhaps?”

Serenius shook his head indignantly. “Of course not!”

Snape frowned. “Hm. Well, 60 points to Slytherin, and just in time to avoid them going to Gryffindor, if I am not mistaken. Goodnight Serenius.”

But Serenius didn’t answer; he was already busy rifling through his favourite potions text, looking for the perfect potion, one the students would never get...

oOo

Arthur felt a perfect sense of home as he stepped into his the kitchen of the Burrow.

His eyes automatically travelled to the clock on the wall to check that all was well with each member of his family.

There was always a tightening in his chest before it registered that no arrows pointed to Mortal Peril.

He trudged slowly up the stairs, overcome with weariness. The house was dark and quiet; Molly must have gone to bed. Well, he was going straight to join her.

He pulled off his shoes in the hallway and entered the bedroom quietly, pulling off his robe as he moved to the bed.

He hopped into the bed, trying not to disturb his wife, but she stirred and opened her eyes.

“You’re home late, dear.”

“The meeting went longer than expected.”

“Did you find out who did it?” she asked sleepily.

"No," he replied, kissing the top of her head and wrapping an arm around her. "The mystery remains."

"Mm." Molly snuggled against him. "Maybe it would be better to forget the whole thing. She's gone and people are safer now; maybe that's what matters most."

He sighed, seconds from falling asleep. "I think I might just agree with you."

oOo

Draco Malfoy thought he might never drink again. It wasn't that he felt completely awful; no, there were potions to fix that. There weren't potions, however, for utterly stupid, mindless, thoughtless, careless, senseless, dim-witted behaviour. He could come up with a good dozen other words, if his head hadn't been pounding and he'd cared to think long enough. After all, he was a well educated young wizard.

This evening - or last night, now - however, he'd acted with complete idiocy. He wAFter

To use a word he'd heard often enough in his youth (he tried not to think from whom), he was a complete dunderhead.

His problem now was women. Their gossiping ways, to be exact.

Women gossiped. It was a fact of life that they just couldn't help themselves. Daughters gossiped to mothers, and mothers gossiped to sisters, even sisters they supposedly didn't associate with. And, inevitably, those very same sisters gossiped to their husbands who, on occasion, might even listen. And husbands reported. Well, that's how it usually went, like, for instance, when his cousin Nymphadora informed her mother of the impending birth, and his Aunt Andromeda ecstatically relayed the news in a hushed Floo call to the manor, and his mother just couldn't keep it to herself, announcing it over dinner. And then, Draco's father reported.

Still, this was a different sort of matter, all things considered. Was the fact that he'd been caught completely inebriated with the bloody Boy-

Who-Lived (who's fault all this was) gossip-worthy information for an Auror, something she'd share with her mother? Would said mother feel it necessary to mention it to her sister, perhaps out of some intended caution? Would said sister approach her husband? Maybe. Maybe it would get that far. But it would go no further. He could at least comfort himself in that.

He would have to prepare himself for a visit from his father. A stern lecture from a bewildered and angered father, if this did all come to pass. Exasperated. Irritated. Frustrated. He sighed. Counting words was about as effective as counting sheep as a method of bringing on sleep.

Draco massaged his temples, shifting into a more comfortable position in his warm bed. There was a significant disadvantage in not being on speaking terms with one's godfather, especially when one's godfather had been one's primary source of any needed potions.

It wouldn't be half so bad, he thought, if it weren't for that bloody ferret that just wouldn't stop squeaking and twisting around his feet when he was trying to sleep.

oOo

We have reached 1000 reviews! Epic! Massive thanks to everyone who has ever reviewed, and 1000 cheers for QuannanHade, who was the 1000th reviewer. Or, if you find yourself short on time, maybe everyone can just do one each...

I've already completed the next chapter. It even has a title that isn't a number. I won't post straight it straight away, since I'm going to be really busy the next few weeks and I want to keep updating on a regular basis, rather than a quick update followed by a really long one. Plus I broked my arm : ( so I'm typing one handed.

So anyway, check back in about...5 days.

Supermassive thanks to last chapter's reviewers: austin316hockey, BadGirlgoesworse, Sweet Heavens, cyiusblack, Slytherin66, JustAnotherParallelDimension, ching965, Jensindenial3516,



oceanlover14, Stygian Styx, Lady Black-Malfoy, pink-fogg, Persidie, nxkris, D4rkPr1nz, SHuntress, kira66, AnExpressionOfWisdom, aresse, Pheonix Eternia, Cenright, Wings of the Night, bybyte, ams71080, purpleflyingmonkeys, texasfaith89 and

Caterina: Good to hear : ) And I think you will eventually see it. Thanks for the review!

marc: Thanks!

QuannanHade: I suppose I can forgive you for not review the last chapter...

I have to admit I don't really like drinking scenes either lol. I never really planned to write one, just happened...

We should see a bit more of Aislinn in the next chapter. Thanks for reviewing :)

mika: :P thanks for that! i like that bit too. probably my favourite bit of that chapter. thanks for the review!

Solomon: Good to hear : ) thanks muchly for leaving a review!

## Feeling Fowl

“What charm are you working on, Harry?” Hermione’s voice held just the slightest desperate whine.

Harry grinned and shook his head. “I’m not telling you Hermione, no matter how many times you ask me.” Seamus laughed softly.

Hermione huffed and cast a dark eye at the back cover of the book Harry was leaning on to do his work. She’d been trying to get it out of him for a while now, unable to fathom why he wouldn’t tell anyone, and he could tell she was becoming increasingly curious.

Apart from the fact that he wanted to keep it to himself in case it didn’t work he had other reason for keeping it to himself. He’d gathered a good list of possible component spells for his chant, and also associated runes. The next step was to combine them in a chant that allowed for a smooth, unbroken wand movement.

Harry turned his hand palm down and shook his sleeve back to check the time on his watch. “It’s nearly half-nine, guys. We’d better get going.”

The other two stopped what they were working on and they all packed up their books before heading down to the dungeons for potions.

The classroom was already open when they got there and Harry glanced briefly at Serenius Mobrey’s painting as he passed on their way in, remembering the potion he’d seen brewing.

They took seats around a table. “Hermione, what’s a potion with honeydew and flax weed in it?”

Hermione tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Well I suppose there’s quite a few. Is it a seventh year level potion?”

Harry shrugged. "All I know about it is that it has honeydew and flax weed in it. At least it smelled like it had those two ingredients in it. Also, it's a silky, pale green colour."

"I believe the potion you are referring to may be Coleridge's Antidote, or perhaps Andromeda's Mist," said Snape as he swept passed their desk, apparently having heard Harry's question as he entered the classroom. "Both of those potions fit your description."

"Er... thankyou, sir."

"Thanks is hardly necessary, Potter. It is my job to teach. Though if you wish, you may thank me by retaining the knowledge."

Seamus rolled his eyes, an action Snape luckily didn't see. Suddenly a small paper bird, magically enchanted, fluttered from somewhere across the room and landed on their desk.

Hermione plucked it off the desk, also looking around to see where it had come from, but no one was looking at them. She unfolded it, her eyes flickering back and forth as she read over whatever was written on it. She gasped, an indignant expression appearing on her face. Harry tugged the piece of parchment from her fingers and read it. It appeared to be some kind of brief pamphlet type thing, the headline reading:

## MUDBLOODS

and the danger they pose to society

Harry scrunched it in his fist, not bothering to read what it said. He glared angrily around the room. Several others of his classmates were whispering over what appeared to be copies of the same thing, and several of the Slytherins in the room were sitting with smug expressions.

The whispering in the room was getting louder and louder, most of the class now shooting daggers at the Slytherins.

“Is something the matter,” asked Snape, turning around with a glare on his face, from where he was writing on the board. “I do not remember asking you to talk.”

No one seemed willing to say anything, but Snape seemed to know exactly what had happened. The advantage of being a Legilimens, thought Harry.

Snape strode forward to the nearest desk and snatched one of the bits of parchment out of a girl’s hand, his eyes scanning it rapidly and his dark scowl deepening.

He looked up, his livid expression sweeping the entire class. After a minute of silence, he spoke.

“I will not have this vilifying propaganda in my classroom,” he hissed in a deadly whisper which nonetheless carried to every corner of the classroom. He turned towards the Slytherins. “Nor will I see it being tossed about the rest of the school, unless you wish to see me take points from anyone with a hand in this. Yes, Ms. Parkinson, I will take points from my own house. Not only that, but I will give anyone I find to be involved a month’s worth of detention cleaning toilets under the supervision of our resident caretaker.”

He raked his gaze over the rest of the class. “The same goes for anyone else here whose sympathies are aligned with those of the people who fabricated this filth.”

Snape waved his hand behind him and the rest of the text appeared on the black surface. “Instructions are on the board. Begin.”

People moved to gather their ingredients, no one daring to utter a word as Snape strode angrily out of the classroom.

There were a few muttered comments during Snape’s brief absence, but when he returned, nobody spoke for the rest of the lesson.

One of the few sentences spoken that lesson was an order from Snape as people began finishing their potions. “Draco, remain behind after class please.”

Malfoy sneered at being addressed by his first name, but answered formally. "Yes sir."

Harry wondered what it could be about. He assumed at first that it was about the pamphlets, but then wouldn't the others have been asked to stay behind as well? Then it occurred to him that perhaps Malfoy was about to find out his Aunt was dead.

When Snape told him, would he remember the brief conversation they'd had about her, would he think it suspicious that Harry had asked him such questions?

Harry stirred his cauldron on automatic, his eyes staring blankly at the stone wall as he considered this.

He would have completely mucked up his potion if Hermione hadn't hissed at him to stop stirring and turn down the heat.

He felt his guilt and worry rising again as he bottled a sample.

He'd been surprisingly happy on Sunday, and this morning, but he could feel gloom settling over him again at the thought of what he had done, and worry that someone would know he'd done it. They mustn't though, because nobody had asked to talk to him, and he was in no doubt that they would have already, had he been seen by any portraits.

The fact that he wasn't a suspect, at least yet, lifted a weight off of him. He focussed on that feeling, pushing any others below his shields. It worked, and his mood improved after that.

He knew it couldn't last though.

oOo

"You will be pleased to hear that Bellatrix LeStrange has been found dead, Potter."

Harry's head shot up to meet Snape's black gaze.

“Murdered, in fact.”

Harry averted his eyes, clearing his throat nervously. “Good. She deserved it.”

“Indeed. Although, the circumstances surrounding her death are something of a mystery... you don’t seem surprised. Don’t you want to know what happened?”

Harry’s palms were sweating. He wiped them on his thighs, marking his robe with two dark smudges. Why was Snape speaking in that tone of voice? He couldn’t know... no one could know. “What happened?”

“A scuffle with an unknown assailant. Exactly what happened may never be known, but it appears she hit her head. Perhaps she fell, perhaps she was pushed.” Snape shrugged casually. “I leave it up to your own imagination... shall we begin?”

Harry blinked, and then nodded, confused by the abrupt end to the conversation. Moments later, they were in Harry’s mind. Snape was looking around at the memories that swirled around them, something he never usually did when they practiced Fidelimency. He seemed to be walking more slowly than usual too, though perhaps it was just Harry’s guilty imagination. He forced himself to not think about Bellatrix. He didn’t want to inadvertently call closer any memory of that night.

It was almost a relief to step into Voldemort’s horcrux, though he wondered suddenly if Snape could access his memories without him knowing while he was preoccupied here. The thought scared him, but there was nothing he could do about it if that’s what Snape decided to do.

He stayed in the horcrux that was attached to his own soul, though he didn’t stay very long.

“Are you certain this activity is having no effect on yourself?” asked Snape yet again, eyeing Harry closely.

"I'm fine, once the headache passes," assured Harry, before changing the subject in case Snape wanted to pursue it. "I found how to get into the other horcruxes."

Snape's eyes widened in surprise. "Really..."

"I went over there-"

"You what!" snapped Snape.

"I have to at some point, don't I?" argued Harry, "Or I'll never destroy the other horcruxes."

"You should have discussed it with me first, in case something went wrong,"

"Sorry, alright! I just wanted to see. It's pretty much the same as the horcrux in me, at least so far. I seem to be able to get to the other horcruxes from there as well."

Snape asked a few more questions which Harry answered as well as he could, and then he left, returning to the Gryffindor Common Room.

oOo

The next morning, everyone found out about the death of Bellatrix Lestrage. It was front page news in the Daily Prophet.

Harry had nearly choked when he'd caught sight of Bellatrix's face staring up at him from the paper.

The entire Hall was a babble of voices, but the noise faded away and all he could hear was the thud of his racing heart as his vision filled with the photographed image he had already seen, in person.

His eyes flickered to the head Table, to Snape, specifically. With a shock he saw that Snape was staring directly at him, a mug clasped between his hands. Assessing Harry's reaction? Did Snape suspect something? It had crossed Harry's mind after their conversation, but

he'd pushed the notion aside, thinking there was no reason for Snape to suspect anything.

Harry averted his eyes. He looked back at the newspaper, starting to shake. He clenched his hands tightly on the pages of the newspaper, willing himself to stop.

All week, he'd been fluctuating between emotions. He'd see Neville, and feel justified, glad, relieved. Then he would see Malfoy, and the guilt would come surging back. He'd see an Order member, and the nagging worry would return.

The Great Hall brought all emotions crashing down at once. Neville, sitting two seats down from him, was strangely peaceful in a way Harry had never seen him, a secret smile on his face. Snape's accusing eyes, he was sure, were still on him, and movement on the other side of the room caught his eye; Malfoy had stood and stormed out of the room, understandable given the fact that a close up of his aunt's lifeless face was taking up three quarters of the page and that most of the people in the Hall were smiling about it.

Harry was breathing fast, shallow breaths.

"I'm telling you, I feel safer knowing she's not out there anymore," declared Lavender.

There were words of agreement from everyone.

"Who do you think killed her?" asked someone in a whisper.

Harry knew his face was red now, he could feel the heat radiating from underneath his collar.

"Dunno," replied Seamus, "but it'd have to be someone with a real killer instinct, wouldn't it? To get past someone like her?"

Harry stood abruptly, knocking over his pumpkin juice. He strode out of the room. In the Entrance Hall, he apparated to a far bathroom. During breakfast, it was guaranteed no one would be so far from the Great Hall.



He collapsed to his knees, expelling his breakfast all over the hard stone floor. He sucked in a few gasps of air, trying to pull himself together. He had potions first up, and if he didn't attend, he had the feeling that if Snape did suspect him, it would only confirm the Potion Master's suspicions.

Harry closed his eyes and took ten deep, slow breaths. The forced slow breathing calmed him down greatly, and he was able to resurrect his shields and push the emotion beneath them.

They were still there, but dulled.

He pushed himself up, opening his eyes and staring into the mirror. His face was impassive now, no sign of his inner turmoil written upon it.

Harry washed his face and straightened his robes, and then apparated to a little-used dungeon corridor, before walking the rest of the way to the potions classroom.

He tried his best to act normally. That was simple; walk to his desk, pull out his chair, sit down. Open his bag, place quill, parchment and textbook on the desk. It was the regular routine, but the whole time he felt his movements were exaggerated, and he could feel eyes boring into him the entire time. When he finally looked up at the front of the room though, Snape's back was turned to the class. No one was looking at him.

He let out a shaky breath. A bead of sweat ran down the side of his face, and he wiped it away. His hairline was damp, despite the fact that it was the usual chilly temperature in the dungeons. The combination made him shiver.

oOo

It was the Hogsmeade weekend the week before Valentine's Day. Since they didn't get one on Valentine's day, those with girlfriends and boyfriends were using the opportunity to spend some time alone.

That left Harry free of Ron and Hermione, which suited him fine. He wanted to look for a gift for Aislinn.

He wandered slowly towards the alley where he had arranged to meet with Malfoy, a bag of Basilisk parts in a deep pocket of his robe.

The Slytherin was already there, and Harry handed him the bag.

Malfoy transfigured his appearance to the same one he had assumed the first time they had sold Basilisk parts. "Shall we?"

Harry nodded and threw his cloak over himself.

Malfoy's gaze raked the air, and he nodded once to indicate that Harry was fully covered before turning and walking out of the alley and into the Apothecary.

The same man as last time was at the counter, and he recognised Malfoy. "Back again, young sir?"

The Slytherin gave a small nod as he approached the counter. He placed the bag of ingredients gently on the counter and opened it up, placing each vial or jar on the counter one by one. "Blood, scales, teeth. We'll accept no less than 400 galleons."

"No venom this time?"

"In short supply I'm afraid, my friend."

The man produced a variety of instruments from under the counter and started testing the ingredients. Ten minutes later he nodded, satisfied and placed the jars and vials into a box behind the counter, which he locked.

"Don' keep tha' much money on the premises," he said, handing Malfoy a cheque. Malfoy looked it over before accepting it. With a nod to the apothecary owned, he strode out, with Harry on his heels.

After a quick trip to the bank, Harry was supplied with a heavy bag of galleons.

“What are you doing now?” asked Malfoy, surprising Harry.

“I want to buy something for Aislinn.”

“Ah yes, the muggle.”

“I don’t know what to get her though. I’ve no idea at all.”

“Are you asking me for advice, Potter?” asked Malfoy with a smirk.

Harry hadn’t been, but he was happy to hear any suggestions.

“Just get her jewellery. All girls like jewellery.” Malfoy started walking, and Harry walked alongside him, still covered in his invisibility cloak. Malfoy was still in disguise, and apparently not concerned about anyone seeing him talking to himself.

“I already bought her a bracelet for Christmas. I want to get something different, but I have no idea what.”

“You said that already. We can look together, since I have to get something too.”

Harry shrugged, surprised by the offer. “Okay.”

“Well, what does she like?”

“She likes rugby, but I can’t really buy her anything for that.”

Malfoy looked over at him quizzically. “Rugby?”

“It’s a muggle sport. You have people on each team, fifteen I think, and basically you score points by putting the ball past a try-line, or goal posts.”

“Wait a minute, ball, as in only one?” Malfoy sounded sceptical.

Harry nodded. “Yes, and since it isn’t magic it doesn’t move around by itself or attack players or anything like that.”

“So it just sits there, until someone comes along and moves it?”

Harry nodded again.

“How utterly boring! Thirty people on the field and only one ball that doesn’t even move!”

Harry laughed. “I guess you have to see it to understand the attraction. I haven’t really seen a game myself, not since I was in primary school.”

“Hm. Well, something else then.” They walked past a pet shop, and Malfoy stopped, looking in the window. “Does she like animals?”

Harry nodded. “The thing is though, I can’t get her anything magical.”

Malfoy rolled her eyes. “I’m sure they have the basic non-magical animals. Besides, I might get something from here, so let’s have a look.”

Harry followed Malfoy into the quiet shop, dragging his cloak off.

The pet shop sounded like any other pet shop he’s ever been in; birds chirping, puppies yapping, kittens mewling.

Unlike muggle pet shops however, the smell was regularly charmed away and the air smelled fresh and clean.

Harry walked down an aisle, peering into cages at all sorts of magical and non-magical pets. He walked over to the bird section. Aislinn had always said how much she loved Hedwig. Perhaps she would like an owl of her own?

He came upon a cage of young owls, apparently called the Eurasian pygmy owl. Harry wondered if it was the same species as Pigwidgeon.

“Those don’t look old enough to have been taken away from their mother!” announced Malfoy indignantly, coming up behind Harry and trying to stick a finger through the bars of the cage. His finger was too

big though and he frowned, seemingly disappointed at not being able to pat one.

“Aislinn would love an owl,” said Harry, almost to himself.

“Get one then. I’m not walking around with you all day, trying to find the perfect gift for someone I don’t even know.”

“You get one too then, if you think your not-girlfriend will like one,” jibed Harry.

Malfoy sneered, but continued to peer interestedly at the small owls. “Doesn’t Weasley have an owl like this?”

“So?”

Malfoy wrinkled his nose, but didn’t answer.

“Can I help you, gentlemen?” asked an attendant, appearing suddenly beside them.

“We’ll take two,” said Malfoy, not glancing at the attendant.

“Please,” added Harry. “I’d like that one there,” he said, pointing to a black and grey one that was hooting softly on one of the perches.

The attendant stared at Harry for a moment, his eyes flicking up to Harry’s forehead, though the scar was covered by his fringe.

“And for you sir?” asked the attendant, looking at Malfoy.

The Slytherin tilted his head, considering the cage of owls. After a few moments he said, “The one there, with the brown and white wings.”

Five minutes later, they were both standing out in the street with little cages which held even littler owls, a bag of owl treats each, and relieved grins.

“That was easier than I thought it would be,” said Harry, holding the cage up and admiring the twittering owl.

"It's not finished yet," announced Malfoy. "Follow me."

They walked a few shops along, coming to Scrivenshaft's.

Harry followed Malfoy in, wondering what he could be looking for in a stationary shop.

They wandered around for a few minutes before Malfoy uttered a small "Aha!" and strode over to a rack, plucking two rolls of thin ribbon off the rack, one pink and one red. "Which one?" he asked, holding them out to Harry for inspection.

Harry looked at the two different coloured ribbons, comparing them to the little owl he'd bought for Aislinn. "Red would match better," he decided.

"I agree." Malfoy paid for the ribbon and then led Harry down the road to the Hog's Head. Not being a particularly clean establishment, no one had brought their girlfriends there and the place was bordering on empty.

Harry bought two butterbeers and took them over to the table, where Malfoy was already working on his own, tying a red piece of ribbon around its neck.

He tied a loose knot, and then muttered a charm and the end of the ribbon curled around his wand in a nice spiral. He did the other end as well. "There!" he said, setting the small owl down on the table with a flourish. "No, don't peck at it," he told the owl, which had started nibbling at a curled end of the ribbon. The Slytherin tucked the ribbon back out of range of the tiny beak.

The tiny owl looked up at Malfoy with big glassy eyes, clearly disappointed. "Don't look at me like that. You have to look pr-"

He broke off when Harry started laughing, muttering "Shut up, Potter," instead.

Malfoy showed the charm he used to curl the ribbon to Harry, and then cut off a few lengths for Harry to take with him.

Ten minutes later, they walked out of the Hog's Head into the slushy street.

Suddenly, Harry spotted someone he had been intending to seek out. Mundungus Fletcher was making his way in a leisurely fashion down the main street.

Harry gave Malfoy what could vaguely be construed as a wave. "I have something to do," he said, not taking his eyes off of Mundungus Fletcher's brown cloaked back. He was almost disappearing in the crowds.

Without waiting for Malfoy to reply, Harry took off at a fast walk, dodging around shoppers and students and trying not to lose his quarry.

Luckily he had much longer legs than the man he was following, and he caught up fairly quickly.

He followed Mundungus until the crowds started to thin out, at which point he ducked into a doorway and pulled on his invisibility cloak.

He went on his way again, and soon they were in streets that were empty of any other pedestrians.

Harry hurried up until he was just a metre behind the man, who was unscrewing a small flask as he walked and about to take a sip. "Dung," he said loudly.

Mundungus jumped at the voice, spilling some amber liquid down his front.

"Dung. It's me, Harry. Can I talk to you?"

"Merlin, boy, are ya trying to give me an 'eart attack?" His eyes searched the air for Harry's invisible form.

“Sorry,” he replied. “Come on, we can go over here.”

He led Mundungus by the shoulder down a paved walkway between two tall buildings. It was empty, and the buildings appeared empty. He cast the Muffliato Charm around them in case anyone was listening, just to be safe.

He pulled the cloak off so that they could see each other.

He pointed his wand at Mundungus, whose eyes widened in surprise. “Arry?”

He knew he could just ask, but the longer they stood there, the more chance there was of them being discovered, and he had a feeling the Mundungus wouldn’t be too willing to tell the truth anyway.

“There’s just something I need to know,” he said, by way of explanation. “Legilimens.” His vision shifted as he penetrated Mundungus’ mind. It was ludicrously easy to find the memory. He’d never performed the spell on anyone besides Snape, and it was horrifyingly easy to find the information he wanted from someone with no skill in Occlumency.

He retreated from Mundungus’ mind, a scowl on his face. “You stole things from Sirius’ house.”

Mundungus shifted guiltily in front of Harry. “It wasn’t nothin’ they wanted, anyway.”

“They? Who is they, Dung? it wasn’t your stuff, and you shouldn’t have taken it.”

He stepped back and pointed his wand at the shorter man again. “Oblivate.”

Mundungus slid slowly down the wall, a catatonic look on his face, but as soon as he hit the ground, he blinked and cleared his throat. “Listen lad, I won’ mention this to ‘nyone, so long’s you don’ mention it either. The stealin’, I mean. A man’s gotta make a living, y’know?”



Harry tuned out his words, grimacing. He'd never performed an Obliviate before, and it clearly hadn't worked.

"Shite," he muttered under his breath, running a hand through his hair.

Someone tisked behind him. "Sloppy, Potter, very sloppy."

Harry spun to find Malfoy leaning casually against the wall, staring down at Mundungus' slumped figure. His eyes flicked up to Harry's, then back down to the grubby man on the ground.

"Malfoy!" Harry stepped over to the Slytherin, lowering his voice. "What are y-... did you follow me?"

Malfoy nodded smugly. "I thought I'd lost you when you put that cloak on, but then I realised who you were following." Harry pursed his lips and turned back to Mundungus.

"Wha-" Mundungus' eyes travelled from Harry to Malfoy, his eyes confused, and then widening as he came to an improbable conclusion. "Harry lad, think what you're doing."

"Don't worry Dung. It's not what you think," Harry said, trying to reassure the man.

The Slytherin took his wand out, holding it loosely. "Did you get what you wanted from him?" asked Malfoy, not taking his eyes off Mundungus.

Harry cleared his throat. "Ah, er... yeah."

"I wondered where you were off to so suddenly, what you were up to. I must say, I never imagined something quite like this." Malfoy gave a grin, part amusement and part grudging respect.

There was a predatorial gleam in his eyes as he angled his wand downwards at the shabby, scared Mundungus. "Obliviate."

Mundungus' eyes took on a blank, glassy sheen.

“Come on,” said Malfoy. “Before he comes around.”

Harry followed the Slytherin around the side of the building. He wasn't worried that Mundungus would worry what had happened to him. He had a feeling that he'd woken up in alleyways, smelling like alcohol before.

They were almost back to the main street of Hogsmeade when Malfoy stopped and turned to face Harry. He was smirking, and there was a look in his eyes that Harry was sure bordered on pride.

Harry ran a hand through his hair again, this time feeling uneasy. “Look, I'd appreciate if you didn't mention this to anyone, alright?”

“I won't.”

Harry let out a long breath, relieved.

“For now.”

“For now?” repeated Harry.

“I'll be keeping it as... insurance.”

“Insurance against what, exactly?” asked Harry loudly, crossing his arms and frowning.

Malfoy shrugged. “Any unforeseen circumstances. I'm sure it's something that would raise difficult questions for you. Something to keep in mind if you ever think about mentioning anything about me to anyone.”

“You know I won't do that.”

“Like I said though, Potter. Unforeseen circumstances.”

“Mr. Potter, Mr. Malfoy.”

Harry and Malfoy looked over to see Professor Sprout, who was the one of the supervising professors for the trip.

“Back to the main street, please. You know you aren’t supposed to be wandering off.”

Malfoy pushed himself off the wall. “You owe me.” The Slytherin winked and walked away, nodding as he swaggered past Sprout. “Professor.”

Harry followed, also acknowledging the professor.

He didn’t think this was anything to worry about too much. Malfoy had no reason to say anything at the moment, and Harry had more dirt on the Slytherin than the Slytherin did on him, anyway.

He was a bit annoyed at being caught by Sprout though. Hopefully she wouldn’t read anything into it, and just think they’d been arguing. He didn’t see why she wouldn’t, after all.

oOo

Harry was peering down on Dumbledore’s office as Snape and Dumbledore talked.

It was proving to be a useful fact-finding mission he was on.

Dumbledore had showed Snape some kind of memory, the two of them disappearing with a ripple into Dumbledore’s pensieve. When they’d reappeared, they’d gone on to discuss an object called Hufflepuff’s Cup, which Dumbledore was ‘almost entirely certain’ was a horcrux.

Snape had agreed.

They’d left soon after, for dinner.

“Hufflepuff’s Cup,” Harry murmured, lying back on the grass and relishing in the sun on his face. It looked as if Dumbledore’s theory of a horcrux for each of the founders was correct. He ran through the mental list of horcruxes; diary, gone. Ring, gone. Himself, Nagini, the locket, Hufflepuff’s Cup, something of Ravenclaw’s.

The horcrux in Nagini could be destroyed by destroying the snake. The horcrux in his own soul would have to be destroyed using Fidelimency, at least, if he wanted to come out of this war alive. The locket he would have soon; at least, that was the plan. He could destroy that one in the same way the diary had been destroyed.

If Hufflepuff's cup was kept safe in the Lestrangle's vault, there was very little that Harry could do about that one. They were an old family; their vault would be deeply hidden, and well guarded. That one too, would have to be destroyed using Fidelimency.

As would the unknown horcrux. 'Something of Ravenclaw's' was little to go on.

Harry left the painting world and walked along the corridor he'd apparated to.

He spun and walked several metres in the other direction, then turned once more and walked another few metres. Turning back, he saw that a door had materialised in the wall.

It had been a while since he'd been in the Room of Requirement, apart from DA meetings. He'd been provided with exactly what he wanted; some large, comfortable cushions, and a large mirror.

Harry took a seat on one of the cushions and stared into the mirror, levelling his wand at himself.

"Legilimens."

He tried this a number of times, with no success. He had no troubles accessing his memories, but that was as far as he could ever get.

He was determined to succeed this time though, and he put all his efforts into concentrating on the Mirror of Erised appearing. And just like that, it did.

It was like one of the muggle puzzle books he had read as a child. He'd gotten a book from the school library one day, and each page

had been covered in a different pattern. If you focussed your eyes just right, a picture appeared in the pattern.

Now, he focussed just right; not just his eyes, but his whole being. His memories slid away into the background, and the mirror materialised in front of him. He was drawn towards it in an instant, melting through its reflective surface and into his soul.

He laughed out loud at having succeeded, harnessing the burst of jubilation as he stepped into the horcrux.

Thinking happy thoughts, he made his way to the bridge and crossed it.

“Show me the unknown horcrux,” he said, once he was in the spinning room. This time, he did cross the bridge, coming into a horcrux that seemed no different to the one in his own body.

After a pain-filled twenty minutes, he decided it was time to leave, and headed back across the bridge.

He was about to leave back to his own soul when he had a thought. What if he could leave something here, something of him that could work while he was gone?

He stepped out a door into the soul that resided in Voldemort’s own body.

It would need to be something positive, or it would be useless.

Harry looked down at himself. He found he was wearing one of Mrs. Weasley’s Christmas jumpers. It was maroon, decorated with a snitch and the letter H.

He tugged it off, smiling at the memories of one happy Christmas he’d spent at the Burrow. The Weasleys were practically family; he loved them, and those feelings were embroidered into the wool, deeper than Mrs. Weasley’s designs.

Harry wasn't sure if the artefact would remain once he left, since it was a part of his consciousness, but he was quite sure that it couldn't be destroyed by anything in Voldemort's soul. After all, it wasn't a real, solid object at all, just a representation of some of Harry's feelings.

Suddenly, a dim light started to appear in the blackness, and he realised it was the representation of Voldemort coming. Hurriedly, he neatly folded the jumper and placed it on the inky blackness on which he stood.

If it worked, he would leave something in the unknown horcrux as well. Feeling that he'd accomplished a lot today, he summoned up the spinning room and opened the door to his own soul, stepping onto the bridge and setting off.

...

Back in the Room of Requirement, Harry groaned as his eyes were assaulted by the light. One thing he hadn't considered when he'd attempted Fidelimency on himself was that there would be no Snape waiting to provide him with the strong pain-relief potion.

He couldn't go to Snape now, though. Harry knew the Potions Master would forbid him to do it on his own, but twice a week just wasn't enough. It was just taking too long for Harry's liking.

With a groan he rolled over on the cushions, barely conscious. He would just have a little rest. When he woke up, he would be feeling well enough and he could go to Madam Pomfrey and say he had a bad headache. She knew about his connection with Voldemort, and would give him something slightly stronger than she would provide to the average student.

That was his last thought before he succumbed to the pain in his head and fainted.

...

"Ah, Harry."

Harry gave a mental groan. He'd just woken up and was on his way to the hospital wing. Dumbledore always turned up at the most inopportune times.

"I've been wanting a word with you for several days now."

Harry's heart gave a jolt and the fear came flooding back. "About what, sir?" he asked, his voice breaking. He forced himself to keep his breathing steady and to look Dumbledore in the eye.

This could be about anything.

But then why did Dumbledore have a slightly grave look on his face?

"About our headboy, Draco."

Harry gave an internal sigh of relief. Of course Tonks and Remus had said something about finding him and Malfoy together.

His mind had been so clouded by what he'd done to Bellatrix that he hadn't thought about his and Malfoy's silly mistake. And then Professor Sprout had seen them together again in Hogsmeade.

"About Saturday night, you mean?" he asked. "I know it wasn't very smart, sir, and it won't be happening again."

Dumbledore nodded. "Whilst I would normally encourage inter-house unity, I fear Mr. Malfoy is not one to forge a friendship with."

Harry gave a wry smile, having no trouble conjuring the expression. "We're hardly friends, sir. I'm sure Remus mentioned that we weren't exactly er..."

Dumbledore smiled and his eyes twinkled.

Harry relaxed. Dumbledore believed him, completely.

"Ah well, I was young once, so I can certainly understand how you may have come to be in such a situation, especially after a Quidditch victory." Dumbledore's beard twitched. "I do fear however that I may

have to have Professor McGonagall crack down on the amount of banned substances that seem to be making their way undetected into the Gryffindor Common Room.”

They exchanged a few more minutes of conversation about Harry’s classes before Dumbledore bid him goodnight.

Harry smiled and nodded goodnight back. Turning, he set off for the hospital wing, the smile vanishing within an instant of turning his back on the Headmaster.

oOo

Hope everyone enjoyed :P

I am a mega-stress-monster at the moment, with all the uni work I have, plus the fractured arm isn’t helping too much, so please forgive me if I don’t update within a week. I will try to, and I have actually written a fair bit of the next chapter. Finishing them is always the hard part though.

Thanks heaps to all of last chapter’s reviewers: Sweet Heavens, Slytherin66, Gondegoogoo, oceanlover14, ching965, Lady Black-Malfoy, BadGirlgoesworse, amber v, purpleflyingmonkeys, bybytte, JustAnotherParallelDimension, D4rkPr1nz, nxkris, GravityMon, Pheonix Eternia, Persidie, kira66, HPMiller, fhippogriff, ams71080, pink-fogg, Stygian Styx, mekareami, Ansleyrocks and

John: Instead of still reading my still boring story, don’t. duh. No, Harry and Malfoy are not going to ‘be gay with each other.’ No, the next chapter’s not as sucky. You’ll see a bit of Voldemort in the upcoming chapters, I think. By the way, your review is really appreciated. Thanks.

QuannanHade: Yep, lucky 1000. Haha I have no idea where ‘He wAFter’ came from. It isn’t in my word document of the chapter, and I made no changes to the chapter once I’d uploaded it, so it’s a mystery to me. Thankyou for the review :P

Lol XD: Thanks for reviewing!



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